



## Continuing Education

# What Funeral Directors Should Know About a Roman Catholic Funeral Service

### INTRODUCTION

A funeral marks the close of a human life on earth. The ritual provides the opportunity for friends and family to express their grief, to give thanks for the life that has completed its journey in this world and to commend the person into God's keeping.

As far back into history as we have on record, human beings seem to have always had the need for a ceremonial leave-taking of those who have died.

The funeral service can be very short and quiet with only a few family members present, or it can be an occasion of great solemnity with music, hymns and hundreds of mourners in attendance. Whatever the service, the words and actions at a Roman Catholic funeral service all speak of a loving God and how precious every human being is to him. The mass, the memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, is the principal celebration.

All too often people say, "Funerals are for the living, not the dead." For Roman Catholics, however, this statement is not com-

plete because the Catholic funeral rites offer believers the opportunity to praise and thank God for the love and mercy He has shown the deceased person. It is also a time where the community prays for the repose of the soul of the deceased and offers consolation to the surviving family and friends.

The model for Roman Catholic funerals is the Easter journey of Jesus Christ, from death to resurrection. This is the reason for celebrating the funeral in three stages: prayer vigil, funeral liturgy and committal.

As a funeral director, it is helpful for you to know and understand the meaning of each part of the ritual for a Roman Catholic funeral.

Note: The following information follows *The Order of Christian Funerals: Guidelines for Catholic Funerals* and may differ in certain details from those practiced in various regions of the country. Funeral practice varies considerably and the Roman Catholic Church provides several options from which its members can freely choose.

### PREFERENCES FOR CATHOLIC FUNERALS

The following options provide, in order of preference by the Catholic Church, those practices deemed acceptable for funeral liturgies.

#### **First Preference - Funeral Rites with the Body Present, Followed by Interment**

The church practices the rites contained in its ritual book - *The Order of Christian Funerals*. Normally, these rites include:

- The Vigil Service or Wake, celebrated in the funeral home,
- The Mass of Christian Burial in the church, and
- The Rite of Committal of the body at the cemetery.

Although the Catholic Church believes the Rosary and other traditions are valuable expressions of faith, they are not to replace the Vigil for the Deceased. However, Rosaries, Prayers After Death and other devotions may be celebrated in addition to the Vigil Service.

It is the Catholic preference for the body of the deceased to be present at the Vigil Service. In addition, the body of the deceased should be brought to the local parish church for the Mass of Christian Burial. Funeral Masses are not permitted in funeral homes or cemetery chapels.

The Rite of Committal of the body normally takes place at the cemetery although the committal may be done at the end of the Funeral Mass.

The body of the deceased is to be interred, either in the ground or in a crypt following the Rite of Committal.

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### **Second Preference - Funeral Rites with the Body Present, Followed by Cremation**

In May, 1963, the Vatican's Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith) lifted a prohibition forbidding Catholics to choose cremation. This permission was incorporated into the revised Code of Canon Law of 1983 (Canon #1176) and into *The Order of Christian Funerals*.

It then became a standard practice to celebrate the funeral liturgy with the body and then take the body to the crematorium. More recently, the bishops of the United States and the Holy See have authorized the celebration of a Catholic funeral liturgy with the cremated remains of the decedent when the body has been cremated before the funeral.

After the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the church revised its rites. In 1969, *The Order of Christian Funerals* was revised, becoming a three-part liturgy: The first part is the "Vigil for the Deceased," the second is "The Funeral Mass", and the third is the

"Rite of Committal."

In 1988, the United States received approval for their edition of the ritual.

On March 21, 1997, the Vatican granted permission for cremated remains to be brought into the church for the Mass of Christian Burial. It is still, however, the Church's preference to have the body present for the Mass of Christian Burial, and then have cremation performed afterwards.

Catholics do not need to ask permission to be cremated, but it is a good idea for the family to discuss their reasons for wanting to use cremation with their pastor or other parish minister.

The Roman Catholic Church does believe the cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given the human body from which they come. If cremated remains are not treated with honor and dignity, cremation can allow for the disrespect of the human body.

Roman Catholics do not believe in the scattering of ashes because it deprives loved ones and descendants of the opportunity to visit the remains where they can pray and reflect upon the life and memory of the

deceased. Dividing the cremated remains among family or friends, or keeping them in the home, also seems to diminish the respect for human life and shows a lack of proper respect and dignity for the dead.

In the Second Preference - where the choice has been made to cremate a body, it is recommended that the cremation take place after the Funeral Liturgy. In this case, the Wake Service should be celebrated in the presence of the body. Then, the body should be brought to the parish church for the Mass of Christian Burial, and cremation should take place afterwards.

After cremation, the cremated remains should be buried, according to *The Order of Christian Funerals*. The cremated remains should be treated with the same respect given to the human body. Therefore, they should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium, but not a common/communal columbarium. This is the reverent disposition of the cremated remains the Church requires.



### Third Preference - Funeral Rites with Cremated Remains Present

While the church has granted the celebration of the Funeral Liturgy, including Mass, in the presence of the cremated remains of the deceased, it is considered the least desirable option. The Church strongly prefers that the body of the deceased be present for its funeral rites since the presence of the body clearly recalls the life and death of the person.

Realizing that the practice of cremation is being chosen for a variety of reasons - including economy and practicality, cremation often occurs before the funeral rites. When this happens, the Vigil for the Deceased may be celebrated in the presence of the cremated remains. Likewise, the cremated remains may be brought to the church for the celebration of the Funeral Mass.

## THE PRIMARY ASPECTS OF ROMAN CATHOLIC FUNERALS

### The Vigil

This is the principal rite celebrated between death and the funeral itself. It is the first stage of the farewell journey. Its mood is one of quiet support, which helps to prepare the survivors and the bereaved for the final leave-taking.

Within the visitation, the formal Vigil prayer occurs. There are many ways the family can shape and participate in this service. Even

the Vigil prayer with its order of biblical readings, prayers and petitions, music and silence allows for a public sharing of stories, poignant memories or personal anecdotes making individual remembrances the property of the gathered community.

The Vigil - or Wake - may be held in the home of the deceased, the funeral home, or in another suitable place, such as a hospital chapel. It also may be celebrated in the church. The body of the deceased may be present, but this is not necessary. The form of the service is a simple Liturgy of the Word of God or Evening Prayer.

Since 1969, the Vigil has been a service of Scripture, a homily, songs, petitions/prayers and a eulogy by family members or friends. Now that the ritual is in English (it was once recited in Latin), all are able to participate and understand the Wake Service or Vigil. Families may still have the devotional prayer or a Rosary. However, devotional prayers or the Rosary are led by lay people. The church requires a priest or deacon to perform the Funeral Vigil.

Historically, the vigil took place in the home of the deceased. The family and others kept vigil by the deathbed, prepared the body for burial and then kept vigil through the many hours (day and night) until the funeral. In the last century, people have chosen their local funeral home for this service. Since the faith life of Christians centers on the parish church, it is becoming more common for vigils and visitations to be held there. Occasionally, the visitation takes place in the cemetery chapel; however, this may present problems as it relates to the full and ideal OCF.

### The Order of the Vigil is as follows:

#### Introductory Rites

Greeting

Opening Song

Invitation to Prayer

#### Liturgy of the Word

First Scriptural Reading

Psalm - can be read or sung (usually by the parish cantor)

Gospel Reading

Homily - by the priest

#### Prayer of Intercession

Litany

The Lord's Prayer

Concluding Prayer

Eulogy (can be offered by various family members or friends)

#### Concluding Rites

Blessing

Song

### The Funeral Liturgy

This part of the journey gathers the mourners to feast fully at the Table of the Lord's holy Word and the Table of his sacred Body and Blood. The followers of Christ, even while facing the reality of death and confronted with their own mortality, proclaim their solidarity in the risen Christ.

In the Mass of Christian Burial, the community is joined together in faith, as one Body in Christ to reaffirm that life is shared - not ended. They celebrate the Banquet of Eternal Life even in the face of human death. Jesus Christ promised that those who eat his body and drink his blood will have life eternal and be raised up on the last day (John 6:54). Shared belief is reflected

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through readings, prayers, music and silence. The symbols of the Resurrection - holy water, the pall, the Easter Candle, incense and white vestments - remind the faithful that the Risen Christ is present bringing the promise of Baptism to fulfillment. It is a celebration of Christ's paschal mystery - through death to life.

The Funeral Mass includes the reception of the body, the liturgy of the Word, the liturgy of the Eucharist and the final commendation and farewell. The Funeral is a rite of the Roman Catholic Church; thus, the parish is responsible for coordinating and unifying the choices of liturgical preparation - readings, music, special actions and ministries.

Family members are encouraged to suggest Scripture readings and appropriate musical selections, as well as be actively involved in the various ministries - pallbearers, instrumental or vocal musicians, placers of the funeral pall on the casket, readers, gift bearers, Eucharistic ministers, greeters and servers.

Another special role is filled when family members or friends offer words of remembrance after communion; this is a singular opportunity to publicly remember a loved one. Sometimes two people together, one speaking and the other supporting, can effectively witness to their love for each other and the deceased. All in all, the entire gathering expresses hope best by participating, rather than just attending, consciously, fully and actively in the worship at the Mass.

The Funeral Mass is usually celebrated in the parish church, where the local community gathers for the Sunday Eucharist. Sometimes people may celebrate the Funeral Liturgy in a crematorium or cemetery chapel. Two forms are possible - the Funeral Mass (also called The Requiem Mass) or a funeral liturgy outside Mass.

The Church encourages a Mass since the Eucharist remembers and celebrates Christ's own death and resurrection. However, while the Eucharist is the church's central liturgy, it is not always the best option for every funeral. To celebrate a funeral without Mass is a truly valid form of Catholic worship.

For the Funeral Mass, symbols such as the cross, bible, rosary, scapular, and others may be placed on the casket at the begin-

ning of the Funeral Mass. All secular items - like flags or medals of honor are important, but are not part of the Funeral Mass. These secular symbols are removed at the church door and a pall is placed over the casket. This symbolizes unity in Christ through baptism. Christian symbols are only used within a church.

At the end of the Communion Rite of Mass, a "Song of Farewell" is sung before the body/casket and the family leaves the church.

### **The Order of the Funeral Mass is as Follows:**

#### **Before Mass**

Sacred instrumentals or songs may be sung

#### **Introductory Rites**

Greeting

Sprinkling with Holy Water

Placing the Pall (family members - sacristan or priest holds before Mass)

Placing of Christian symbols (optional - done by family)

Opening Song

Opening Prayer

#### **Liturgy of the Word**

First Reading - chosen from Hebrew Scriptures or New Testament (May have two New Testament readings during Easter season)

Psalms - can be read or sung by parish cantor

Second Reading (from New Testament)

Gospel

Intercessions (composed in ritual book)

#### **Liturgy of the Eucharist**

Presentation Song

Preparation of the Gifts and Altar (choose family members to bring gifts)

Continuation of the Mass as usual

Communion Song

Communion - Communion ministers from the parish will assist

#### **Final Commendation**

Invitation to Prayer

Silence

Song of Farewell

Prayer of Commendation

Song

Procession to Place of Committal

### **The Rite of Committal**

This part of the journey is a leave-taking. At this time, the family and mourners acknowledge a change in the relationship with the deceased because of a physical separation, but they also proclaim an unchanging bond in the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead.

The journey to the cemetery brings the deceased to the final earthly destination and brings the funeral rites to full closure. It is not simply reciting the prayers of committal, but being in the place of committal that is important.

In some areas, the practice of accompanying the deceased and the family to the cemetery for the rite of committal has become less common and periodically the burial of the body is not witnessed at all. Regional issues - such as climate - are often cited as limiting factors; however, those ministering to the family and assisting in the funeral ritual preparation should be aware of the value of communal presence at the committal of the body and the potential for healing that being present for the burial may bring to the bereaved.

As the last formal rite of the public liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church, the Committal is for all, not solely for family. During this time, short scripture passages and intercessions are read, music is encouraged and clear signs of leave-taking are displayed.

Since we no longer can see or touch the deceased, gestures are directed toward the casket or urn. A bow, a touch, a traced cross, especially a kiss communicates our leave-taking. A family group or couple may stand together in making such a sign. The graveside may have options not available in the chapel, and vice versa.

Cultural and ethnic backgrounds are important and need full expression. Flowers, printed memento, or other keepsake serve as reminders of the committal and the deceased. This moment operates at the liturgical as well as the emotional level; both need to be acknowledged.

The Rite of Committal usually follows immediately after the funeral liturgy. This final act of leave-taking can be celebrated at the graveside or at the crematorium. When the body is cremated, the funeral liturgy is concluded with the interring of ashes sometime afterwards.



If there is to be a ground burial, the family and those attending travel from the church by procession to the cemetery.

**The Rite of Committal is as follows:**

- Invitation
- Scripture Verse
- Prayer over the Place of Committal
- Intercessions
- The Lord's Prayer
- Concluding Prayer
- Prayer Over the People
- Song

**OTHER ROMAN CATHOLIC FUNERAL RITUALS**

**Prayers After Death**

This ritual is used immediately after death. The presence of the minister and the traditional readings and the prayers can be of great comfort to the family. (Order of Christian Funerals #101-108)

**Gathering in the Presence of the Body**

This ritual can also be of great comfort to family members and friends. It allows for a time of simple prayer and shared silence. (Order of Christian Funerals #109-118)

**Gathering of the Family and Transfer of the Body**

This service may be used if the family gathers in the funeral

home or in their own home (with the body) immediately prior to setting out for the church or place of committal.

**Reception of the Body at the Church**

In many parts of the country where this happens the night before, a large crowd has customarily gathered. In other places, there may be few or no mourners. Still, in other areas, the family, alone, may meet the body when it is brought to the church.

**NOTES FOR FUNERAL DIRECTORS**

If the priest has not been present at the deathbed, many families prefer that the body not be removed until the priest or someone from their church has been contacted and has had an opportunity to visit.

Whenever possible, funeral directors and priests should try to find a mutually agreeable time for the funeral service(s) . . . mainly to ensure that a congregation can be present for the main funeral service.

When arranging a funeral, the family may be unaware of some of the options open to them. For example, at the crematorium, the casket may remain in view at the end of the service - if a service is held there - or it may be removed during the service. Funeral directors provide an invaluable service in assisting the family to decide on these details and ensuring the wishes of the family are carried out.

If a white pall (large white cloth) is used to cover the casket, the funeral directors may be asked to help fold it after its removal at the end of the funeral service.

If the priest asks that a white pall and/or a cross or bible be placed on top of the casket at the beginning of the service, any other covering, such as the American flag, flowers or wreaths, should be removed at the church door. These may be replaced after leaving the church.

Flowers may be placed in a suitable location near the casket. Likewise, provision should be made for a nearby table to hold the Mass and sympathy cards. These should not be placed on the casket.

The rite favors the involvement of as many family members and friends as possible in the funeral service. This would include pallbearers to carry the casket, which is often preferable to wheeling the casket from place to place.