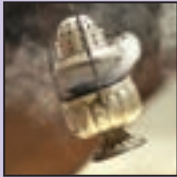


**Incense:** Incense serves a twofold purpose in the funeral rites: to show respect for the deceased’s body — which became a temple of the Holy Spirit in baptism — and to represent the prayers of the assembly on the deceased’s behalf, rising to God’s throne.



**Flowers:** Flowers may be used “in moderation” (OCF, 38). Some parishes have specific rules on the use of flowers, so it is a good idea to check with parish staff before making arrangements.

**Liturgical color:** For funeral Masses in the United States, the sacred ministers may wear white, violet, or black vestments. “The liturgical color chosen for funerals should express Christian hope but should not be offensive to human grief or sorrow” (OCF, 39). This is the choice of the sacred minister, but if you have a preference, feel free to express it.



FUNERAL ELEMENTS

READINGS

The readings from Scripture “provide the family and the community with an opportunity to hear God speak to them in their needs, sorrows, fears and hopes” (OCF, 22). There are four readings for a Catholic funeral. The parish staff usually provides families with copies of the readings from which they can choose. The readings should be one each from the Old and New Testaments (though during the Easter season both readings come from the New Testament) in addition to a Gospel passage. There also is a psalm, which is usually sung. Be aware that there are a variety of readings, particularly for use in unique or special circumstances.

PRAYERS

The orations of the presiding minister address God on behalf of the entire Church in their prayer for the deceased. In addition to general orations (either

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inside or outside the Easter season), there are a variety of options that may be suited to more specific circumstances — such as for a young person, for one who suffered a long illness, or for one who died suddenly, etc. There are many other options ( for prefaces and Eucharistic prayers), so discuss that with the parish staff if interested.

MUSIC

The music chosen for a Christian funeral “should express the paschal mystery of the Lord’s suffering, death, and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture” (OCF, 30). As a resource to those planning funerals, many parishes will often have a list of hymns appropriate for use at a funeral from which to select. “The music at funerals should support, console, and uplift the participants” (31).

There are normally three hymns chosen for use: at the entrance, at the preparation of the gifts, and at the reception of Communion, in addition to musical settings for the Mass responses. There also is what is called the song of farewell, sung at the end of the funeral Mass during the final commendation.

Moments of silence are important, too, to “permit the assembly to reflect upon the word of God and the meaning of the celebration” (OCF, 34).

LITURGICAL MINISTERS

Because many roles for volunteers at funerals are liturgical, great care must be taken to ensure that these ministers are well-trained and suitable. You may wish to choose readers for the first and second readings, to present the gifts at the offertory, or to serve the Mass. In addition to liturgical ministers, there might be the need for pallbearers (usually six) or representatives of the family or close friends to place the pall and Christian symbols on the casket or near the cremains.



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UNDERSTANDING  
AND PLANNING  
CATHOLIC  
FUNERALS



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Catholic funerals express the Christian hope in eternal life and the resurrection of the body on the last day. Every component of Catholic funeral rites should express these fundamental beliefs and hopes. Instead of what sometimes is called “a celebration of life,” a funeral is really 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.

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. Parish staff should guide them through the process.

This guide is meant to explain 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.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Death is a new beginning for Christians. “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], 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.



BURIAL OR CREMATION?

One of the first decisions to be made is whether the deceased will be buried or cremated. The Church’s tradition prefers burial over cremation. However, cremation is allowed, so long as this option is not chosen to express anything contrary to the hope in the resurrection of the body. More and more families are opting for cremation today with hopes to decrease funeral expenses.

In either case, a place of burial needs to be chosen. Bodies are to be disposed of in a fitting and dignified way, consonant with the human dignity that should be afforded everyone, as we are made in the image of God.

Cremains must be buried — not placed in the home, spread on land or at sea, etc. This need not be only in a cemetery grave, but perhaps a parish columbarium — or niches, akin to mausoleums. Burial at sea is also permitted, so long as the body or cremains are in a sealed container (not spread openly).

In cases of burial, choices regarding attire should recall 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?

It is preferable that a funeral Mass be celebrated in the presence of the body of the deceased, but not required. As the Order of Christian Funerals states, “The Mass, the memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral” (5).

There are times, however, that a funeral Mass might not be preferable or might not be permitted. This should be discussed with parish staff during the planning stages. If a funeral Mass is not chosen, it is desirable that a memorial Mass should be scheduled for the deceased’s intention at a later date.

If Mass is not chosen, a funeral Liturgy of the Word and final commendation of the deceased is celebrated. These may be conducted at the church, the funeral home, in a chapel at the cemetery, or even at the graveside.

VIGIL FOR THE DECEASED

Wakes, or viewings, are opportunities for family and friends to come together, console one another, and recall the impact the deceased had on them. Though typically in a funeral home, this is sometimes conducted in a church facility — a matter that would need to be discussed or 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; 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 also is a time for 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 from the Liturgy of the Hours — the Church’s daily prayer, composed of psalms, readings, and prayers.



CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS

Numerous symbols are employed in Catholic funerals, such as:



**Holy water:** A reminder of the deceased’s membership in the Body of Christ through baptism. Holy water is used to welcome the body or cremains into the church and at the time of the final commendation.

**Easter candle:** The Easter, or Paschal, candle reminds Christians of Christ’s presence among us. Blessed each year at the Easter Vigil, the presence of the candle at a funeral reminds the assembly of that night when, in hope, the Church anticipates Christ’s resurrection.



**Pall:** It is customary in the United States and other places to place a white cloth over the casket or cremains, called a pall. This is another reminder of baptism — when each of the baptized receives a white garment that signifies their dignity. The

pall also symbolizes that each person is equal in the eyes of an all-loving and merciful Father.

**Book of Gospels or Bible:** Christians model their lives on the Word of God, and so it might be appropriate to place a Bible or Book of the Gospels atop the casket or near the cremains during the funeral Mass. It reminds the assembly that fidelity to the Word in this life leads to newness of life in eternity.



**Cross:** A cross or crucifix may be placed atop the casket or near the cremains during the funeral Mass. This reminds us of the primary Christian symbol with which we were signed at baptism and by which Christ redeemed the world and won victory over sin and death.