



When a Loved One Dies

A Catholic Guide for Families in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois



Finding hope, prayer, and peace through the Church's Funeral Rites

The death of a loved one is a sad and difficult time. We naturally mourn the loss of our loved ones whose presence in our lives we will miss deeply. However, this is also a time of hope and grace. As Catholic Christians we place all of our hope in Our Lord Jesus Christ, who through His Passion, Death, and Resurrection has conquered death and prepared the path to eternal life.

The Purpose of Catholic Funeral Rites

- To worship God in thanksgiving for the gift of the person's life.
- To pray for the soul of the deceased, commending them to God's mercy and asking forgiveness of sins.
- To bring hope and consolation to the living, strengthened by the promise of the Resurrection.

In these rites, the Church proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ and reminds us that God's mercy is greater than death.

A Catholic funeral is not a single moment, but a journey of prayer made up of three sacred "stations," often connected by processions:

1. **The Vigil:** typically held at the funeral home the evening before the funeral Mass. It is the Church's official prayer for the deceased and a time for family, friends, and community to gather.

2. **The Funeral Liturgy (typically Mass):** celebrated in the parish church, this is the heart of the Catholic funeral rites, where we unite the life of the deceased to Christ's sacrifice in the Eucharist.
3. **The Rite of Committal:** celebrated at the cemetery, where the body or cremated remains are laid to rest in hope of the Resurrection.

These sacred movements help us accompany our loved one in prayer and gently move through grief within the rhythm of the Church's prayer.

Visitations (or Wakes) and Vigil Prayers

The visitation (or wake) and Vigil are two related but distinct parts of the Catholic funeral rites, each serving an important purpose in accompanying the deceased and comforting the family.

1. The Vigil is the Church's official prayer for the deceased and for those who mourn. It is normally celebrated the evening before the Funeral Mass, often during the visitation period, and is an integral part of the Order of Christian Funerals. While the *Rosary* or other devotions may be prayed, they do not replace the Vigil, though they can be included alongside it.
2. The Vigil may be celebrated with or without the presence of the family. When possible, it is led by a priest, deacon, or parish representative on behalf of the Church, continuing the Church's prayer for the deceased even if loved ones are unable to attend.
3. The Vigil is not held on the morning of the Funeral.

"JESUS TOLD HER, 'I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE; WHOEVER BELIEVES IN ME, EVEN IF HE DIES, WILL LIVE.'" (JOHN 11:25) | DIO.ORG/FUNERAL



al Mass. Its purpose reflects the idea of “keeping watch,” rooted in the tradition of staying close to the body of the deceased in prayer and remembrance. Holding it the evening before also gives more time for family, friends, and the community to offer their condolences and prayers.

4. The visitation and Vigil are most commonly held at the funeral home, where the setting best accommodates gathering and visiting. In certain circumstances, such as a large number of mourners, they may be held at the church with the pastor’s permission, typically in the gathering space or narthex. The body or cremated remains are not left on parish property overnight.

What Music Can Be Played at a Funeral Mass?

Music at a Funeral Mass should come from approved Catholic liturgical hymnals, just as it does at any Mass. This ensures that what is sung reflects our Catholic faith, especially our hope in the Resurrection and God’s mercy. While some secular or personal songs may be meaningful, they are not used during the Mass itself, or during the other funeral rituals, since the liturgy is prayer addressed to God. Carefully chosen sacred music helps lift our hearts in prayer and expresses the faith of the Church.

Words of Remembrance (Eulogy)

A eulogy is not part of the Catholic Funeral Liturgy. However, brief words of remembrance may be permitted:

- They should focus on the person’s faith and relationship with God.
- They must be written in advance and approved by the pastor.
- They should be brief (approximately 250–350 words).
- They are read by a priest or deacon.

Personal stories and memories are best shared at the visitation, family gatherings, or the luncheon, where there is more freedom and time.

Cremation

The Church permits cremation, though burial of the body is still preferred because it more clearly reflects the Christian belief in the Resurrection of the body.

If cremation is chosen:

- The body is ideally present for the Vigil and Funeral Mass before cremation.
- Cremated remains are to be treated with the same dignity as the body.
- They must be placed in a worthy vessel and buried or entombed in a cemetery. Cremated remains may not be placed in a keepsake or jewelry.
- They may not be scattered, divided, or kept in the home.
- Burial should take place normally within 30 days.

The Church reveres the human body as a temple of the Holy Spirit and destined for resurrection glory in Christ.

Why Be Buried in a Catholic Cemetery?

A Catholic cemetery is a sacred place of hope. It is a “resting place,” where the body awaits the Resurrection promised by Christ. Because the human body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, the Church treats burial with great dignity and reverence. A Catholic cemetery also provides a peaceful place for families to visit, pray, and remain connected to their loved one. Most importantly, those buried in Catholic cemeteries are remembered in the prayers of the Church, especially at Masses and through ongoing blessings, offering the assurance that they are continually commended to God’s mercy if they are awaiting eternal life in Purgatory.

A Final Word of Hope

In the face of death, the Church proclaims a hope the world cannot give: Jesus Christ is risen, and death does not have the final word. Through the funeral rites of the Church, we commend our loved ones to God, pray for their souls, and entrust ourselves to the promise of the Resurrection. In your time of loss, know that the Church walks with you — praying for your loved one, supporting your family, and always pointing to the hope of eternal life in Christ.

