

WHAT FAMILIES SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE CATHOLIC FUNERAL RITES

Catholics have a right to a Catholic Funeral by virtue of their incorporation into the Church through the Sacrament of Baptism. **The Rites of a Catholic Funeral include the following elements: (*Prayers after Death, Prayers in the presence of the Body*), the Scripture Prayer Service at the Wake, the Funeral Mass at church, and the Interment Prayer Service at the cemetery.**

Together these services not only make up the whole Catholic Funeral Service, but provide the Church's special prayers for the deceased. These are also intended to meet the many needs of those who are grieving.

As much as we don't like to dwell on death, it is a real part of our lives and families. The Catholic Rites are intended to pray for the person who has died and help us deal with the difficulties and reality of death. Our faith provides strength and courage to face this radical loss in our lives. Even those who do not share our Catholic faith recognize that these Funeral Rites bring some greater understanding to a circumstance which of itself seeks answers.

Our culture, which often tries to avoid uncomfortable aspects of life, sometimes wants to skip some or all of the rites of a funeral - thinking that it is best to "just get it over with." Unfortunately, research shows us that the opposite is the reality. People who do not have adequate time to face death as the Funeral Rites allow and who do not have time to grieve with the support of friends and family often suffer with separation anxiety and grief longer than those who take the time to participate in the grieving process through the rites of the Church.

Sometimes, relatives who are deciding the details of the funeral are not Catholic or are "non practicing" Catholics, and feel as if they would be uncomfortable with the Catholic Funeral Rites. Indeed, they may be unfamiliar with these rites, but since Catholics expect and have a right to the full rites of the Catholic Church, they do the deceased an injustice by limiting these normal rites. These special prayers are due Catholics by belonging to the Church through Baptism. In these situations, the persons planning the funeral arrangements need to think about the faith which the Church provides its members and what it offers for the deceased.

HONORING THE BODY

Part of Catholic belief is that those who follow the way of Jesus shall be forever in heaven, body and soul, in the presence of God. We believe in the bodily resurrection! Also the Church honors the body because it has been the temple of the Holy Spirit. It was the body that was baptized - beginning our relationship with God. The whole celebration of Christmas - the feast of the Incarnation - is God coming to dwell in our flesh. From the earliest Christian times, the bodies of Christians were reverenced and put into burial tombs out of respect for the person and because he or she was the temple of God. Even in the times of early Christian persecutions, when the act of burying the dead was dangerously unsafe for those who might be caught, the catacombs were filled with the remains of Christian bodies awaiting the resurrection. Again this shows the importance of the sacredness of God's dwelling in the flesh. **Therefore the Church says that the body should normally be present at the Funeral Rites. If the person or family wishes cremation, it should take place after the Funeral Service or Funeral Mass.** Then the cremated ashes must be buried in a place of respect.

DISRESPECTFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES

In the modern practices of our culture concerning Funeral Services, some families find immediate cremation of the body to be desirable because it is less expensive. Because the Church sees the reverence of our body as important, it presumes the body will be present at the funeral rites. Funeral directors can offer you alternative suggestions for having the body present for the ceremonies without your purchasing a casket for the funeral.

Until recently, if the body had been cremated, the Funeral Mass was not celebrated with the ashes, but rather a memorial Mass was celebrated sometime after the Funeral Services. The ashes were not permitted to be brought to the Church during the memorial Mass, but recent Church changes now allow the ashes to be present at the Funeral Services (even though the Church prefers the body to be present). The ceremony is slightly different and references to honoring the body and baptism are omitted.

UNDERSTANDING THE CATHOLIC FUNERAL RITES

The Catholic Church's Funeral Rites involve a series of ceremonies. Each one takes us along a process of facing the reality of death and the stages of grief. Ideally, all these rites should be celebrated for the sake of the people who remain, as well as to pray for the deceased person.

The order of the Catholic Funeral Rites is as follows:

- After the death of the person, the priest, if he has been called, will say the ***Prayers after Death***. Often times, if the priest was not present at the time of death or shortly after, then he (or a church minister) may pray these prayers when he or she meets the family to plan for the funeral services.
- There is also an "optional prayer time" when the family gathers for ***Prayer in the Presence of the Body*** for the first time at the funeral home. This is usually a difficult time, since the reality of death is vividly brought to us. This short prayer service allows the family to grieve privately before the friends and neighbors also gather to grieve.

- The ***Vigil*** or ***Wake*** is a time to recall and tell stories of the loved one. As we tell stories we understand the special character of the person through the eyes of the one telling the story and through the heart reflecting on the stories. The ***Vigil Prayers*** also tell stories of Jesus' death and resurrection and what he told us about eternal life. This helps us put this death into a perspective from God's view, rather than the painful human view that all has ended. Part of the Vigil Prayer is also a story-telling of the wonderful loving actions of the deceased.
- The heart of the Catholic Funeral Rite is the ***Funeral Mass***. It is the ultimate prayer offered for the deceased and for the family and friends. It is not just a respectful prayer service, but it is a sacrificial offering to God for the benefit of the deceased. In addition, it will also help those who grieve to know they have honored their loved one with the highest Sacrament of the Catholic Faith.
- Sometimes circumstances suggest that the Funeral Service be outside of Mass (but not outside the church, at the funeral home) - perhaps the deceased was a non-practicing Catholic, or one of the high holy days of the Church does not permit a Funeral Mass to be prayed at this time. **However, most Catholics should have, and are entitled to have, the Catholic Funeral Mass, and it should not be denied them even if the remaining relatives are not Catholics or practicing Catholics.** In such cases, the relatives would **deny the special benefits given through these prayers of the Church** for the deceased person.
- The final part of the Funeral Rite of the Church is the ***Committal Prayers*** at the burial. Waiting for the final resurrection and the coming of Jesus is the purpose of the burial. Christ makes "holy the graves of the just" as he waited for his resurrection and gives hope to all who await resurrection.

THE REVERENT AND HOLY PLACE OF WAITING

The Church sees that placing the body or the ashes in a reverent place where people can visit is very important. We will rise in our bodies, so we reverently prepare the place for the body to await the resurrection. Cremains (the ashes) need also a safe and reverent place to await the resurrection. They are either buried in the ground or a mausoleum or placed in a columbarium. We, as those who mourn, also need a place to come to grieve. We have loved our deceased relative and friend and need time to let go of the physical bonds which have allowed us to relate. We will never loose those spiritual and heartfelt bonds that relationship brought; time will help heal the pain of physical separation. A deeper understanding of our relationship and ultimate letting go of the physical relationship is what grief is about. This letting go is difficult and takes time. This is also a reason why we survivors need a place to come and visit and grieve. **Scattering the ashes is considered irreverent and disrespectful to the body and is not permitted by our Catholic beliefs.** It is also illegal in most places.

The Church does allow burial at sea when we are in war simply because of the practical issues. It sees that practice as an exception that is necessary at war, and sees burial in ground, mausoleum or columbarium as the preferred way of reverence.

Sometimes families wish to keep the cremated ashes at home on the mantle, but again **the Church does not permit this practice because of the probability of an accident, and it also**

sees the routine daily life overshadowing the special presence of the bodily remains, and ultimately, it disrespects them by failing to show honor. The remains should be placed in a columbarium or buried in the ground. We are also reminded that "burying the dead" is a corporal work of mercy of the Church.

MASS STIPENDS

"He then took up a collection among all his soldiers, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice. In doing this he acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection of the dead in view; for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been useless and foolish to pray for them in death. But if he did this with a view to the splendid reward that awaits those who had gone to rest in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin." 2 Maccabees 12:43-46

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that the Eucharistic sacrifice (Mass) is "offered for the *faithful departed* who 'have died in Christ but are not yet wholly purified,' so that they may be able to enter into the light and peace of Christ". It is our obligation to pray for those who have died. Families and friends are encouraged to offer Masses for the dead. The family may arrange those Masses directly with the parish.

APPROPRIATE CUSTOMS

Music

"Music is integral to the funeral rites. It allows the community to express convictions and feelings that words alone may fail to convey. It has the power to console and uplift the mourners and to strengthen the unity of the assembly in faith and love." However, non-liturgical or secular music is forbidden before or during the funeral rites, particularly in the Church, according to the Catholic Funeral Guidelines.

Eulogies

Though the priest or deacon will remember the faithful departed in the homily, the homily is not the proper time in the Church's liturgy for a eulogy. It is recommended that if the family wishes to have a eulogy, the Vigil (wake) is the most appropriate time for family and friends to share reflections. Also, one member of the family only may speak for a few minutes after the Prayer after Communion at the Funeral Mass.