

Diocese of Duluth

Funeral Guidelines

Introduction

The Catholic Church confidently proclaims the triumph of Jesus Christ over sin and death. Yet the Church also understands the grief associated with the death of a loved one and so offers you and your family condolences.

When facing the reality of death, it is our faith in God's promise of eternal life for the faithful that is our greatest hope and consolation. The funeral liturgy, established by the Church centuries ago, utilizes certain signs, symbols, and rituals that effectively communicate this faith to us. In this way, the funeral liturgy guides us through the spiritual, physical, and emotional journey of grieving for our beloved dead. A Catholic funeral is therefore not the personal prayer of the deceased or of the family of the deceased, it is an official, public prayer of the universal Church. In order to help facilitate the funeral celebration of your loved one, please consider the following guidelines.

Pastoral Guidelines

A. Funeral Rites

1. The Church encourages the celebration of funerals with a Mass whenever possible.

Since the celebration of the Mass is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in union with God that commemorates and makes present Christ's victory over death, funerals are principally and preferably celebrated with a Mass, our most profound way of expressing communion with the living and the dead. By offering Christ's sacrifice to the Father through the Mass, the Church pleads for God's mercy for the deceased and gives thanks for the hope of eternal life with God.

In particular, when planning a funeral Mass, the final wishes of the deceased to have a funeral Mass should be respected, most especially when the deceased was a regular communicant and an active member of the parish community.

2. Funeral liturgies are normally celebrated in a parish church.

As an expression of faith and support by the local Catholic community, a funeral liturgy should occur in a church, the sacred place where the parish gathers to pray, celebrates the sacraments, and reserves and venerates the Body of Christ. A funeral without a Mass may be celebrated in the funeral home, a cemetery chapel, or in another suitable place.

3. **The readings chosen for funeral Masses are always to be taken from Scripture and are ordinarily proclaimed by a Catholic.**

In every celebration for the dead, the Church attaches great importance to the reading of the word of God. The readings proclaim to the assembly the paschal mystery, teach remembrance of the dead, convey the hope of being gathered together again in God's kingdom, and encourage the witness of Christian life.¹

In the celebration of the liturgy of the word at the funeral, the biblical readings may not be replaced by nonbiblical readings.²

The reading of Scripture during a Eucharistic celebration in the Catholic Church is to be done by members of that Church. On exceptional occasions and for a just cause, the Bishop of the diocese may permit a member of another Church or ecclesial Community to take on the task of reader.³

It is appropriate for family members to assist the celebrant in choosing the texts from Sacred Scripture to be read at the funeral. This provides the family with an opportunity to hear God speak to them in the midst of their grief, and also of correlating the many promises and consolations of God's Word to their particular experience. If, however, this process were to become burdensome, for whatever reason, the family may always opt to have the celebrant choose the readings instead. In some parishes, celebrants may prefer to take this responsibility on themselves.

Ordinarily, non-Catholics are not permitted to proclaim the Scriptures at Mass. The Word of God is not merely read during the liturgy, it is proclaimed. Effective proclamation of the Word of God demands the ability to evoke faith in others by demonstrating one's own faith. Lectors at Mass "should be truly suited to perform this function and should receive careful preparation."⁴

4. **A funeral includes a homily, not a eulogy.**

At the vigil service and/or the funeral liturgy, the priest or deacon will preach after the readings from Scripture. The purpose of this preaching—properly called a **homily**—is to "illumine the mystery of Christian death in the light of the risen Christ"⁵ as proclaimed in the readings. As Christians, we are challenged to be comforted by the truths of our faith, and the homily serves to direct our attention to these beliefs.

A **eulogy**, which focuses praise on an individual, is neither appropriate nor permitted at Catholic funerals.⁶ During a funeral, our praise is directed toward God in gratitude for the Risen Christ and his promise of salvation. A suitable place for a proper eulogy is, in order of preference: (1) at the conclusion of the vigil service; (2) at a reception following the funeral Mass; (3) before the funeral Mass begins; (4) following the prayers of committal at the cemetery.

The Order of Christian Funerals does permit (though not prefer) brief **words of remembrance** prior to the final commendation and farewell at a funeral Mass.⁷ Words of remembrance are not intended to give a biography or focus praise on the deceased, but to share some insight into the faith and values of the deceased for the edification of the hearers. Words of remembrance must be brief (5min or less) and can delivered by one person only. The celebrant reserves the right to review the speaker's text or outline in advance of the funeral Mass.

¹ Order of Christian Funerals, 22

² *ibid.*, 23

³ Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, 133

⁴ General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 101

⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1688

⁶ OCF, 27, 141

⁷ *ibid.*, 170

5. Music at funerals should express our Catholic faith and be drawn from Scripture.

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. The texts of the songs chosen for a particular celebration should express the paschal mystery of the Lord's suffering, death, and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture.⁸

As in all Catholic liturgies, music is sung prayer and it plays an integral role in the funeral Mass. Because the Mass is the public, official prayer of the Church, the words we sing at Mass matter. Song choices must therefore be consistent with the meaning and purpose of the Mass as a whole.

For this reason, while favorite songs that are popular or secular may hold special meaning for the deceased and the family, this type of music is not appropriate for the Mass, nor is the use of recorded music.⁹ All music selections must be chosen from an approved Catholic hymnal to ensure the songs are in keeping with the principles of our faith.¹⁰ Due to the limited resources of individual parishes, however, not every selection—even from approved sources—can necessarily be accommodated.

6. If cremation is desired for legitimate reasons, the Church prefers that the funeral liturgy occur before cremation.

Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in those rites.¹¹

Through the centuries, the Church has followed the practice of burial or entombment after the manner of Christ's own burial. On March 21, 1997, the Holy See granted an indult giving special permission to U.S. bishops to allow the celebration of the funeral liturgy in the presence of cremated remains. This permission was granted on condition that cremation not be inspired by motives contrary to Christian teaching.¹²

If cremation occurs before the funeral liturgy “*the cremated remains of the body are to be placed in a worthy vessel.*”¹³ Parishes may wish to invest in a parish ossuary (a receptacle in which the funeral urn or box is placed) for use in the liturgy. Trinkets, mementos, and other objects are not to be placed near the remains during a funeral liturgy as this distracts from the presence of the remains. In the liturgy, we treat cremated remains the same as we do a body, except where the rite specifies otherwise.

7. Non-practicing Catholics may receive Catholic funerals.

By our baptism we have been made equal in dignity before the Lord, and the Church, our Mother, bears the suffering of all those who became her sons and daughters through baptism. Thus, the Church offers funeral rites (including a funeral Mass) even for non-practicing Catholics and, under

⁸ OCF, 30

⁹ Liturgical Music Today, 60

The liturgy is a complexus of signs expressed by living human beings. Music, being preeminent among these signs, ought to be "live." While recorded music, therefore, might be used to advantage outside the liturgy as an aid in the teaching of new music, it should, as a norm, never be used within the liturgy to replace the congregation, the choir, the organist or other instrumentalists.

¹⁰ cf. GIRM, 48

¹¹ OCF, 413

¹² *ibid.*, 426

¹³ *ibid.*, 427

certain circumstances, for non-Catholic Christians. Although the deceased may not have participated fully in the life of the Church on earth, the Church longs for her separated children to share in Christ's blessings. She desires to pray for them and with their loved ones so that their sins may be forgiven and they may dwell forever in the presence of God in Heaven. If it is desired that a non-Catholic be given an ecclesiastical funeral, the Pastor must first seek the permission of the Diocesan Bishop or the Vicar General.¹⁴

B. Burial/Interment

8. The Church prefers the burial or interment of the full body because of its symbolic value.

Burial or interment of the full body has been the constant practice of the Church. It is a sign of her reverence for the human body, and her belief in the Resurrection on the Last Day. As Christ's body was interred, so the Church prefers to bury/inter the bodies of the deceased while still intact. The Church follows the example of Christ in the hope that, like Christ, the dead will rise again.

The Church strongly encourages its members to continue this venerable practice and avoid cremation unless it is necessary. In death, the human body serves as a symbol of the goodness of creation and an expression of the truths of our faith. We are called to have the courage to look on the bodies of our deceased through the eyes of hope and foresee the day when our bodies will be clothed with immortality.

9. Cremated remains are always to be buried or interred.

Following the most ancient Christian tradition, the Church insistently recommends that the bodies of the deceased be buried in cemeteries or other sacred places.¹⁵

When, for legitimate motives, cremation of the body has been chosen, the ashes of the faithful must be laid to rest in a sacred place, that is, in a cemetery or, in certain cases, in a church or an area, which has been set aside for this purpose, and so dedicated by the competent ecclesial authority.¹⁶

[T]he conservation of the ashes of the departed in a domestic residence is not permitted... [T]he ashes may not be divided among various family members and due respect must be maintained regarding the circumstances of such a conservation. In order that every appearance of pantheism, naturalism or nihilism be avoided, it is not permitted to scatter the ashes of the faithful departed in the air, on land, at sea or in some other way, nor may they be preserved in mementos, pieces of jewelry or other objects.¹⁷

On October 26, 2016, the Vatican clarified that Catholics may be cremated but should not have their ashes scattered on land, at sea, or kept in urns at home. The Church urges her members to reverence cremated remains just as we also reverence the body. In our tradition, we affirm both the uniqueness of each person and the bonds that unite us as the Body of Christ. Thus, we bury or inter the dead in cemeteries, which mark the lives of each individual, while serving as powerful, visual reminders of the community that remains after death.

Furthermore, finality and closure are crucial elements of the natural grieving process. Failure to bury the dead, or the delay of a burial without cause, can prolong and impede the grieving process.

¹⁴ Canon 1183 §3. Please note that if a Funeral Mass is celebrated for a baptized non-Catholic, it is not permitted to insert the name of the deceased in the Eucharistic prayer (see *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, n 121.)

¹⁵ Instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* Regarding the Burial of the Deceased and the Conservation of the Ashes in the Case of Cremation, 3

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 5

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 6-7