



Funeral Guidelines in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Regina

LITURGY OFFICE

Introduction

The true significance of death is revealed in the light of Christian faith. Death, for a Christian, is the gateway to eternal life in Christ. St. Paul reminds us not to grieve as those who have no hope, for we are given hope and comfort in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

The pastoral care of the Church and its funeral rites are directed towards a proclamation of faith. In the *Order of Christian Funerals (OCF)* we find directives for the celebration of funerals and discover the following:

- ❖ At the death of a Christian, whose life and faith was begun in the waters of baptism and strengthened at the Eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of its confident belief that death is not the end nor does it break the bonds forged in life.
- ❖ The Church also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting Word of God and the Sacrament of the Eucharist.
- ❖ Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life that has been returned to God, the author of life and the hope of the just.
- ❖ The Church through its funeral rites commends the dead to God's mercy and pleads for the forgiveness of their sins.
- ❖ In the funeral rites, especially in the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice, the Christian community expresses the union of the Church on earth with the Church in heaven in the one great Communion of Saints. Although separated from those who remain, nevertheless the dead are still at one with the community of believers on earth and benefit from their prayers and intercession, (OCF, nos. 4-6).

The Funeral Rites of the Church

The *Order of Christian Funerals* provides three distinct rites through which the Church intercedes, consoles, offers thanksgiving, and expresses the Christian faith in eternal life and in the Communion of the Saints:

❖ **Vigil for the Deceased**—The Church provides rites for use during the period between the time of death and the Funeral Mass. In this way, the Church prayerfully accompanies the family through the initial time of grieving following the death of a loved one, helping them to draw comfort and hope from faith in the risen Lord. These prayers may take place at either a funeral home or in the parish church in the presence of family, friends and members of the parish community.

❖ **Funeral Liturgy**—The Church earnestly desires that the family and friends of the deceased gather with members of the parish community for the celebration of the funeral Mass. This takes place in the parish church. We are strengthened by the scriptural proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and by the Eucharistic presence of our Lord, whose own passage from death to life gives hope to all who die believing in Him.

❖ **The Rite of Committal**—The funeral rites conclude with the Rite of Committal, celebrated at the place of interment. The family and other members of the Church prayerfully offer their final act of respect toward the loved one's body, which will be raised up on the last day in accordance with the promise of Christ.

Guidelines for the Celebration of the Funeral Liturgy

Our increasingly secularized society threatens to not just obscure, but to even overtake the Christian perspective on death. For this reason it is necessary to have certain guidelines, which preserve and emphasize the Christian character of the funeral rites, and thus serve to give real consolation and hope to our people when a loved one dies. The priest or pastoral minister with whom funeral arrangements are made will help the bereaved family in making choices in conformity with the funeral rites themselves, thus drawing on the consolations of faith in Jesus Christ.

The Place of the Funeral

The proper place for the funeral liturgy is in the church of the parish community to which the deceased belonged. Normally, this should be a funeral Mass. For pastoral reasons, the parish priest may determine with the family that a funeral liturgy without the celebration of Mass is more appropriate. This, too, is most properly celebrated in the parish church. In exceptional circumstances the funeral liturgy without Mass may be celebrated in the funeral home, in which case every effort is to be made to ensure the official rites of the Church are reverently celebrated.

Funeral Masses on Sunday

On the first day of the week, the day of the risen Lord, God the Father assembles His people in the Spirit to sing His praises. Sunday has a unique place in Christian worship. It is a day for the whole community to gather to celebrate the Eucharist in communion with the universal Church. Mass on this day is to be celebrated in accordance with the readings and prayers set forth by the Church in the liturgical calendar. For this reason, it is not a day for particular celebrations such as funeral Masses. In Canada funeral Masses may be celebrated on any day other than Sundays, Christmas Day, New Year's Day, Holy Thursday, and during the Easter Triduum (from the Mass of the Lord's Supper to Easter Sunday inclusive).

Symbols of our Faith

During the funeral liturgy one sees simple yet powerful symbols that reflect our hope in the resurrection. The paschal candle is lit to show that Christ is the light that dispels the darkness of sin and death; holy water is sprinkled to recall the new life of baptism; and the casket is covered with a white pall, which symbolizes the Christian dignity of all the baptized. When the body is brought to the Church, any symbols that may have adorned the coffin, such as national flags or insignia of association to which the deceased belonged, are removed in favour of the pall. In this way the unique dignity given in baptism and the fundamental equality of all before God is symbolized. Insignia and other items, such as pictures, are most appropriately displayed at the funeral home during the visitation or in the parish centre during the reception following the Mass. Non-religious symbols should not detract from the primary Christian expressions conveyed by the pall and paschal candle. PowerPoint presentations, slide shows, videos, etc., are not to take place in the church.

Scripture Readings

The readings for the Mass are always taken from the sacred Scriptures. The Word of God announces Christian faith in the resurrection of the dead. Though we face death, we remember that Christ has conquered it and through his victory we too have the promise of eternal life. Only passages from the Scriptures can be proclaimed during the funeral liturgy. Other poetic or devotional readings may be shared during the reception following the Mass.

Eulogies at Funerals

Catholics may be surprised to learn, as they prepare for the funeral liturgy, that there is no provision for a eulogy in the ritual. The General Introduction to the **Order of Christian Funerals** quite clearly states that the homily after the gospel reading is never to be a eulogy. Eulogies are often a significant feature in non-Catholic funerals, but Catholics should understand that this is not an element of Catholic tradition or liturgy.

When Christians gather for the funeral Mass, we do so to praise God the Father who has given us eternal life in His Son, and who is merciful to those who die believing in Jesus. In the Christian funeral we gather not to praise the deceased but to pray for them. For this reason, eulogies are not given.

The fact that a eulogy is not permitted does not mean that there can be no reference to the deceased person during the homily. Those who preach are directed to dwell on God's compassionate love and the paschal mystery as proclaimed in the Scripture readings. As well, they are directed to be attentive to the grief of those present and to help them understand the mystery of God's love and the paschal mystery in the life of the deceased person and in their own lives. References to the person's life of faith and love are obviously appropriate. It is the "high praise" of a eulogy in the strict sense of the word, praise that has no reference to Christian life and is sometimes exaggerated, that is out of place in an act of worship.

It is natural that members of the family of the deceased may wish to speak publicly in remembrance of their loved one. A very effective way of doing so is at the celebration of the vigil prayers, during the visitation at the funeral home, before the beginning of the funeral Mass, at the cemetery or during the reception following the liturgy. Indeed, these are moments when a number of persons may speak and share their memories. Families may wish to publicize this as part of the obituary notice.

Music

Music has a powerful and healing effect on us during the liturgy. If the funeral is taking place within a specific liturgical season (Advent, Lent, Christmas, Easter) it will be most appropriate to have hymns that reflect this in order to connect the death of the deceased with the rhythm of the Church's liturgical year. All music in the church must be liturgical in nature. Secular or recorded music is not appropriate as part of the liturgy itself but may be shared as part of the memorial for the deceased at the vigil or at the reception. The choice of hymns is to be made in dialogue with the presiding priest and the music ministry of the parish.

Cremation

Even though the Church retains its preference for the burial of the body after the example of Christ's own burial, permission has been granted for Catholics to be cremated. If the choice for cremation is made, the Church strongly encourages Catholics to have it take place after the Mass of Christian Burial has been celebrated. This allows for the full celebration of the liturgical funeral rites in the presence of the body, which is accorded great honour in the Christian tradition as the temple of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, when cremation takes place immediately after death, the family may be deprived of the psychologically important opportunity to take leave of their loved one.

In keeping with a spirit of reverence and in anticipation of the resurrection of the body, the Church asks that all cremated remains be buried in a grave. A specific place for a person's remains helps focus the remembering and prayer for the deceased person by the family and friends, and by the Church in general. The scattering of cremated remains, their separation for placement in different locations, or keeping them in homes does not display appropriate Christian reverence and hope and should therefore be avoided.