



### **Who can have a Catholic funeral?**

**The purpose of a Catholic funeral is not to affirm that the person who has died was a “good Catholic”.**

On February 15, 2024, over a thousand people gathered at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City to celebrate the funeral of Cecilia Gentili, a prominent transgender activist and advocate for sex workers, and people living with HIV/AIDS. After the funeral took place, a firestorm of controversy erupted. The pastor of the cathedral, Father Enrique Salvo, described the event as sacrilegious, deceptive, and a scandal. Some commentators decried the behavior of the participants, and others observed that Gentili was an avowed atheist who should not have received a “Catholic funeral”.

Should church officials have prevented the event? Are there rules that tell us who is allowed to have a Catholic funeral, and who is not?

In a sense, the term *Catholic funeral* is misleading, since there is not just one funeral ritual that Catholics celebrate when someone has died. The *Order of Christian Funerals* is traditionally linked by processional rites and enriched by local custom. These rituals are referred to collectively as a funeral.

There is also no such thing as a Catholic funeral in a strict theological sense. Funeral rites may be regulated by the Catholic Church, shaped by distinctively Catholic customs, and culminate in a Catholic celebration of the Eucharist. However, the funeral itself refers to the identity of the deceased **as a Christian** and remains for the surviving an opportunity of hope and catechesis of living out our human life in the footsteps and worship of Jesus, the Christ.

The church does not offer funeral rites to individuals because they are Catholic, but rather because **they have been baptized** into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To celebrate a Catholic funeral is not to affirm that the person who has died was a good Catholic, but rather that

this person, through the grace of baptism, has died in the hope of eternal life with God. In principle, a Catholic funeral is appropriate for any Christian.

In practice, the celebration of Catholic funerals is governed by the Church's Code of Canon Law. The Church ordinarily permits its funeral rites to be celebrated for: 1) any Catholic person; 2) any catechumen [a person in catechetical preparation for baptism into the Catholic Church] who died while preparing for baptism; and 3) any child whose parents intended for them to be baptized.

These last two categories or groups are included in modern church law as a result of the traditional notion and understanding of "*baptism by desire*." Canon law likewise permits funeral rites for non-Catholic Christians, so long as: 1) it is appropriate in the judgment of the local bishop; 2) not contrary to the wishes of the deceased; and 3) no minister of the person's own ecclesial community is available.

At the discretion of a bishop, it is permissible for the local diocese/church to withhold its funeral rites also, however. This is done only for persons who at the time of their death were willfully separated from God and His church.

In such cases, the church's concern must always be pastoral in nature. To deny someone access to a Christian funeral is not a punishment for the deceased or their loved ones. Nor is it a judgment against the state of a decedent's soul: No one can state with certainty whether a person has died reconciled to God. To withhold funeral rites is only permissible to guard against confusion among the living faithful. Given the potential for harm, such cases are generally few and far between.

At any rate, the rules only tell us so much about the meaning of a Christian funeral. If we want to understand what is happening in these celebrations, we must go to the essentials: What does it really mean for a person to die?

A typical answer to this question is that human death consists of the separation of the soul from the body. This is a fairly rudimentary definition of human death, which describes in general metaphysical language a stark physical reality: The human body ceases to function. Whatever mysterious thing gave this body life, whatever infused this organism with a dynamic personal presence, is now gone.

One difficulty with this definition is that it does not tell us much about the mystery of the person themselves or what precisely has been lost in death. It may be so that the *body* is no longer animated, but in what sense has the *person* or *personhood* now departed?

The great theologian Karl Rahner wrote that in order to understand the meaning of death, we must first understand what it means to be a human person. He proposed three existential characteristics: *to be a person is to be free; to be embodied in space and time; and to be in relationship*. When these qualities have been lost, then the person has died. They have departed the world of our ordinary experience.

This does not mean, however, that the individual has been annihilated. Rather, they have entered into the abundant love and infinite mystery of God. The meaning of death, as referenced in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), is transformed by Jesus Christ. In Him we know that to die is not to be destroyed, but rather to make passage, as he did, from life on this secular Earth to the eternal life of the heavenly resurrection. [To share in Jesus's birth, life, death and resurrection.] This is the completion of the new birth that began at our reception of the Sacrament of Baptism.

In sacraments, [we are nourished in the embrace of God], and now in death we are born to the new life which was promised all along.

Importantly, the funeral itself is not a sacrament. Sacraments are for the living, to sustain us in our journey to God. To celebrate a funeral is a different kind of liturgical act undertaken by the people of God. It is an act of hope in the power of the Spirit, and it has a twofold purpose: 1) to console those gathered; and 2) to commend this person to the love and mercy of God.

The funeral is also a celebration of humanity, as embodied in [the person of the decedent]. When we gather to remember this person's life and death, alongside the Eucharistic memorial of the life, passion, death, and resurrection [the Paschal Mystery] of Our Lord Jesus Christ, we rejoice in the mystery of our infinite human dignity [and our interpersonal relationship with Almighty God, who created us in His Image].

Catholic theology, doctrine and teaching for centuries prohibited cremation and still to this day prohibits the commercialized practices of bodily disposition, such as: alkaline hydrolysis and human composting. It also requires that the resting place of [the integral] human remains be respectfully marked for memorialization with at least the decedent's name. Such regulations are meant to safeguard the dignity of the person. Human persons are not just matter to be returned to the ecosphere. They are individuals, deeply related to the Earth, [however, also divinely created] and valued by Our Almighty God in their specificity.

God remembers each of us forever, and so in our funeral rites, we remember one another.

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