



AT THE TIME OF DEATH

“AT THE DEATH OF A CHRISTIAN, whose life of 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.

“Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and the hope of the just. The Mass, the memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral.

“The Church through its funeral rites commends the dead to God’s merciful love and pleads for the forgiveness of their sins” (from the General Introduction of the Order of Christian Funerals [OCF]).

Soon after death occurs, those responsible for the burial of the deceased should contact both the funeral director and the pastor of the parish where the Funeral Mass will be celebrated. No firm arrangements should be made until both the funeral director and the pastor are in agreement with the family as to how the funeral rites will proceed.

REGARDING CREMATION

The Catholic Church permits – but does not encourage – cremation. From the earliest days of Christianity the Church’s respect for the human body dictated that the body of the deceased should be buried with great reverence. Cremation is now permitted only if this is not seen as an expression of disrespect for the body or denial of the resurrection of the body.

If the body of the deceased is to be cremated, ideally this should be done after the Funeral Mass in the presence of the body. If the body is cremated before the Funeral Mass, the cremated remains may be brought to the church for the Funeral Mass (It should in this case more rightly be called a Memorial Mass because a Funeral Mass always includes the presence of the body.)

The cremated remains are to be treated with the same reverence we give to the body of the deceased. The remains should be placed in a worthy vessel, which is carried to the place of burial or entombment with the same respect given to a casket carrying a body.

It is absolutely forbidden for anyone to retain the cremated remains or to divide up the remains into several vessels or to scatter the remains in any way. The Instruction of the Holy Office of 1963 states:

“The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium. The practice of scattering cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or keeping cremated remains in the home of a relative or friend of the deceased are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires.”

Those charged with the burial of one whose body is to be cremated must assure the parish priest that the cremated remains will be taken to the place of burial immediately or very shortly after the Funeral Mass.

THE FUNERAL RITES



THE VIGIL. “The vigil for the deceased is the principal rite celebrated by the Christian community in the time following death and before the funeral liturgy” (OCF,54). Usually the vigil is celebrated either at the funeral home or at the parish church. “At the vigil the Christian community keeps watch with the family in prayer to the God of mercy and finds strength in Christ’s presence” (OCF, 56).

The vigil is the most appropriate time for eulogies and the sharing of memories of the deceased.

THE FUNERAL MASS. “When one of its members dies, the Church encourages the celebration of the Mass” (OCF, 154).

Those in charge of the funeral and burial of the deceased should see to it that a Funeral Mass is celebrated in the presence of the body (or at least a Memorial Mass in the presence of the cremated remains).

Even though many family members and friends may not be Catholics, the deceased should never be denied the rites of his/her Church at death.

The family of the deceased or those in charge of his/her burial should meet with the parish priest (or his delegate) as soon as possible after the death in order to make arrangements for the funeral rites – especially the planning of the Funeral Mass.



The Funeral Mass is to be celebrated according to the norms of the Catholic Church. These will be explained by the parish priest at the time of the meeting. Only sacred music is permitted at the Funeral Mass. Recorded music may be used only to support the singing of the choir and congregation. Even though eulogies (if desired) are most appropriately given at the Vigil Service, one eulogy by a family member or friend is permitted at the Funeral Mass, following the Prayer after Communion. The eulogy should be brief (no more than 5 minutes) and should recount the good works – especially those that are related to the spiritual life – of the deceased. The parish priest will give specific guidelines for the preparation of the eulogy.

THE RITE OF COMMITTAL. “The rite of committal, the conclusion of the funeral rites, is the final act of the community of faith in caring for the body of its deceased member. It may be celebrated at the grave, tomb, or crematorium and may be used for burial at sea. Whenever possible, the rite of committal is to be celebrated at the site of committal, that is, beside the open grave or place of interment, rather than a cemetery chapel” (OCF, 204).

AFTER THE FUNERAL RITES



The family, friends and fellow parishioners of the deceased should pray for the final salvation of the deceased. Praying for the dead is a practice of Catholics that dates from ancient times and finds its biblical foundation in the Old Testament (cf. 2 Maccabees, 12:38-46).

*Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord,
and let perpetual light shine upon them.
May their souls and the souls of all the faithful
departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.
Amen.*

FUNERALS *in the* CATHOLIC CHURCH

