

A ZENIT DAILY DISPATCH

Funeral Masses for a Suicide

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Answered by Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy at the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical University.

Q: What is the current stand of the Church regarding the possibility of funeral Masses "in corpore presente" of persons who are said to have committed suicide? Is it true that there already are mitigating circumstances, like the possibility of irrationality at the moment of taking one's life (even if there was no note), whereby it would be possible to suppose that the person was not in his right mind, and that therefore it is licit to let the funeral entourage to enter a church and a funeral Mass be said? — E.C.M., Manila, Philippines

A: In earlier times a person who committed suicide would often be denied funeral rites and even burial in a Church cemetery. However, some consideration has always been taken into account of the person's mental state at the time.

In one famous case, when Rudolph, the heir to the throne of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, committed suicide in 1889, the medical bulletin declared evidence of "mental aberrations" so that Pope Leo XIII would grant a religious funeral and burial in the imperial crypt. Other similar concessions were probably quietly made in less sonorous cases.

Canon law no longer specifically mentions suicide as an impediment to funeral rites or religious sepulture.

Canon 1184 mentions only three cases: a notorious apostate, heretic or schismatic; those who requested cremation for motives contrary to the Christian faith; and manifest sinners to whom a Church funeral cannot be granted without causing public scandal to the faithful. These restrictions apply only if there has been no sign of repentance before death.

The local bishop weighs any doubtful cases and in practice a prudent priest should always consult with the bishop before denying a funeral Mass.

A particular case of suicide might enter into the third case — that of a manifest and unrepentant sinner — especially if the suicide follows another grave crime such as murder.

In most cases, however, the progress made in the study of the underlying causes of self-destruction shows that the vast majority are consequences of an accumulation of psychological factors that impede making a free and deliberative act of the will.

Thus the general tendency is to see this extreme gesture as almost always resulting from the effects of an imbalanced mental state and, as a consequence, it is no longer forbidden to hold a funeral rite for a person who has committed this gesture although each case must still be studied on its merits.

Finally, it makes little difference, from the viewpoint of liturgical law, whether the body is present or not. If someone is denied a Church funeral, this applies to all public ceremonies although it does not impede the celebration of private Masses for the soul of the deceased.

The same principle applies to funeral Masses of those whose body is unavailable for burial due to loss or destruction. Certainly the rites are different when the body is present or absent, but the Church's public intercession for the deceased is equally manifest in both cases. ZE05111522

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Follow-up: Funeral Masses [11-29-2005]

A New Zealand reader asked for clarifications regarding our mention of Canon 1184 that "those who requested cremation for motives contrary to the Christian faith" were not to be given a Church funeral (see Nov. 15).

She asks: "Can you please tell me what motives for cremation might be considered contrary to Christian faith?"

The proviso in this canon is presumably rarely actually invoked. A person would only incur such a prohibition if, before death, he or she requested cremation explicitly and publicly motivated by a denial of some aspect of Christian faith regarding life after death.

Among possible such motivations would be a lack of faith in the survival of the immortal soul and thus requesting cremation to emphasize the definitiveness of death. Another could be the denial of belief in the resurrection of the dead.

More recently, some nominal Catholics who have dabbled in New Age pantheism or believe in doctrines such as reincarnation or migration of souls might request cremation in order to follow these esoteric doctrines or the customs of some Eastern religions.

In all such cases the motivation for seeking cremation is contrary to Catholic doctrine and, if this fact is publicly known, performing a Church funeral could cause scandal or imply that holding to Church doctrine is really not that important. ZE05112920

Ref.: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Liturgy/zlitur106.htm>