

GUIDELINES FOR CATHOLIC FUNERAL RITES

INTRODUCTION

The Catholic Funeral Rites in the *Order of Christian Funerals* (1989) are celebrations that enable the Christian community to mourn as well as to hope by focusing on the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ. These guidelines are offered to assist pastors and their pastoral staffs in effectively preparing the funeral rites with individuals and families.

The *Order of Christian Funerals* is the only canonically approved liturgical rite in English. Liturgical books in other languages must be approved by their proper Episcopal Conferences. Ministers serving in communities with diverse languages should take care that they are using the current approved translation of the Latin, *Ordo Exsequiarum*.

ENTITLEMENT TO THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH AT THE TIME OF DEATH

Every Catholic, unless specifically excluded by the norms of law, is entitled to the Church's ministry at the time of death.

1. In coordination with the pastoral staff, the family of the deceased and the funeral director chosen by the family arrange the place and set the time for the Vigil, the Funeral Mass and the Rite of Committal.
2. The Funeral Mass is ordinarily the central element of Catholic funerals. The Funeral Mass is a prayer for God's mercy for the deceased and a solace for the living, including the entire faith community.
3. Catechumens may be given Catholic Funeral Rites.
4. Catholic Funeral Rites, including the Funeral Mass, are permitted for a deceased baptized non-Catholic who might reasonably be presumed to desire or prefer the Catholic rite. Such a decision would be appropriate when non-Catholics worship regularly in the Catholic Church or identify with the Catholic Church more than any other.
5. To foster and respect family bonds, non-Catholic members of Catholic families may be interred in a Catholic cemetery. Clergy of other communions may conduct the cemetery rites according to their tradition, if the family so desires or if it was the expressed wish of the deceased.
6. The Church encourages the burial of Catholics in Catholic cemeteries (Canon 1180.1). Burial in the consecrated ground of a Catholic cemetery is a sign of baptismal commitment and gives witness, even in death, to faith in Christ's resurrection.
7. A child who dies before baptism, or a stillborn or miscarried child may be given Catholic Funeral Rites if the parents intended to have the child baptized. The remains of fetuses or stillborns should always receive reverent Christian burial if this is at all possible. These remains may be placed either in specific individual graves or in a common burial area.

8. The *Order for Christian Funerals* provides a complete funeral liturgy for children who have died (OCF #234-342). The various texts for a baptized child or a child who died before baptism make these rites fully adaptable to various situations, and offer consolation for those suffering the extraordinary grief which comes with the death of a child.
9. There is no objection to Catholics making prior arrangements to donate their bodies or parts of them, after certain death, to advance medical science. Upon eventual disposition of the body or its parts, there should be reasonable assurance that the remains will be disposed of in a proper, reverential manner. The family of such a donor should be encouraged to celebrate a Mass as soon as possible after death. Whatever remains of the body after an organ transplant or medical research should be given appropriate burial. The rite of final committal with final commendation (OCF #224-233) offers a model for concluding prayers for the donor and the donor's family.

INVOLVEMENT OF THE ENTIRE PARISH COMMUNITY

Since the ministry of consolation belongs to the entire Christian community, the entire community is to be involved in caring for the dying, praying for the dead and comforting those who mourn.

2. Regular catechesis is encouraged to help parishioners understand their role in ministering to those who have suffered the loss of a loved one.
3. Parish policies, procedures and ministerial resources are to be developed in light of these guidelines and communicated clearly to parishioners so they can take full advantage of the services available to them at the time of death.
4. Funeral directors provide an invaluable service to families and to the Church. Often the funeral director provides the first response to a family who has experienced the death of a loved one. It is important for parish staffs and local funeral directors to cultivate an attitude of mutual respect and effective collaboration. Annual meetings with funeral directors within a parish or cluster of parishes are encouraged. Funeral directors are encouraged to include study of the *Order of Christian Funerals* as part of their regular in-service study, and are invited to call upon the services of the Office for Liturgy and Spirituality.

MINISTRIES IN THE RITES OF THE ORDER FOR CHRISTIAN FUNERALS

In keeping with the norms found in the *Order of Christian Funerals*, priests and deacons are to share the responsibility for planning and implementation of the Order with qualified lay ministers.

1. Priests, as teachers of faith and ministers of comfort, preside at the funeral rites, especially the Mass; the celebration of the funeral liturgy is especially entrusted to pastors and associate pastors. When no priest is available, deacons, as minister of the word, of the altar, and of charity, preside at funeral rites. When no priest or deacon is available for the vigil and related rites or the rite of committal, a layperson presides (OCF, n. 14).
2. The rite, Gathering in the Presence of the Body (OCF #109-118), may be used if a priest, deacon, or parish minister is present at the time of death, or when the family first visits the body.

3. A pastoral visit to the family by the priest celebrating the Funeral Mass is an expected part of the Church's ministry of consolation. The ministry of a bereavement group or ministry of consolation is never to substitute for the pastoral visit of the priest.
4. Part of the priest's ministry to the grieving family may include the offer to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. This may be appropriate when the family has not participated in worship for some time. However this does not warrant general absolution.
5. The service of all appropriate liturgical ministers is recommended in the celebration of the various liturgies of the *Order of Christian Funerals*. Laymen and laywomen may serve as readers, musicians, ushers, pallbearers and, according to existing norms, as special ministers of the eucharist (OCF #15).
6. The preparation of the liturgy can provide consolation for the mourners. However the preparation of the liturgy should never become a burden for the family. The *Order of Christian Funerals* recommends that family members be involved in some of the liturgical roles, unless they prefer not to be involved (OCF #15). Nevertheless, they might designate the persons to place the pall or appropriate symbols on the casket at the reception of the body at the doors of the church, as well as the persons to bring gifts of bread and wine to the altar (OCF #152).
7. Music selected for the *Order of Christian Funerals* should be appropriate for Christian prayer and conform to liturgical directives. The texts of the music should express the paschal mystery of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. This is especially important for the Song of Farewell. Popular non-religious songs are not to be used in the liturgy.

THE VIGIL

The vigil is often the first time family, friends and members of the parish community gather in remembrance of the deceased, for prayer and support. The vigil may be celebrated in the home of the deceased, in the funeral home, or in the church.

1. During the wake, the Vigil for the Deceased is the principal rite celebrated by the Church in the time following death and before the Funeral Liturgy. The practice of scheduling a specific hour for the Vigil for the Deceased is encouraged in order for more of the faithful to participate in this liturgy. Devotions such as the rosary are permitted at other times during the wake.
2. The Vigil for the Deceased may provide a chance to take part in the funeral rites for those unable to participate in the Funeral Mass or Rite of Committal.
3. When no priest or deacon is available, it is permissible for a trained lay minister to be designated by the pastor to preside at the Vigil for the Deceased, providing the person has been formed in an understanding of the *Order of Christian Funerals* and is also skilled at leading public prayer.
4. After the Prayer of Intercession or at some other suitable time during the Vigil, it is appropriate for a family member or a friend to speak in remembrance of the deceased (OCF #62).
5. When the Vigil for the Deceased is celebrated in a church, a priest or deacon is to be vested in an alb and stole. A lay minister who presides wears lay clothing in accord with the dignity of the role or is vested in an alb (cf. Guidelines for Lay Presiders).
6. When a wake takes place in the church the Vigil for the Deceased with Reception at the Church (OCF #82) is to be celebrated.

7. Particular groups may be invited to celebrate a prayer service for the deceased in addition to the Vigil for the Deceased or there may be distinct times of prayer within the wake. The Liturgy of the Hours, Office for the Dead, (OCF, Part IV) provides a form of a Vigil for the Deceased. Morning prayer from the Office might also be celebrated on the day of committal, following an evening Funeral Mass.
8. The presence of a cantor or other music minister at the Vigil for the Deceased can be helpful in leading the people in prayer, particularly in the singing of the psalms and responses of the liturgy.

SCHEDULING THE FUNERAL LITURGIES

1. The Funeral Mass may be celebrated at any hour of the day. Each parish should develop a clear policy on funeral schedules that is shared with parishioners and local funeral directors. While local policy should take into account the daily Mass of the parish, the availability of priests, the scheduling of liturgies and other parish events, sensitivity to the grieving family should be paramount in scheduling the Funeral Mass.
2. If the Funeral Mass is celebrated in the evening, a sufficient length of time should separate it from the celebration of the Vigil for the Deceased. The schedule for the Rite of Committal, ordinarily the next day, should be announced and the faithful invited to reconvene at that time.
3. The Vigil for the Deceased should be celebrated at a convenient time. The time may be published in the newspaper obituary notice.
4. Funeral directors are asked to respect the correct names of the various liturgical rites in written obituary notices. Proper terms such as “Vigil for the Deceased”, “Funeral Mass”, “Funeral Liturgy outside Mass”, and “Rite of Committal” are encouraged.
5. Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer from the Office for the Dead (OCF, Part IV) may be scheduled during the time of the wake. The Office for the Dead may be celebrated in the funeral home, church, or oratory of a religious community, or in the family home.
6. Funeral Masses are not celebrated on solemnities of obligation, on Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday, or on the Sundays of Advent, Lent and the Easter Season. At a Funeral Mass celebrated on Ash Wednesday, ashes are not distributed.
7. On days when the Funeral Mass may not be celebrated, the appropriate Rite is the Funeral Liturgy outside of Mass.
8. Although the Funeral Mass is ordinarily celebrated in the parish church to which the deceased belonged, it is possible to choose any Catholic church for the Funeral Mass, provided the pastor of that church agrees and the pastor of the deceased has been informed (Canon 1177). The Funeral Mass may also be celebrated in chapels of Catholic long-term care institutions.
9. If two or more families, or a religious community, desire it, a Funeral Mass may be celebrated for more than one person.
10. The Funeral Mass may be celebrated at one of the regularly scheduled daily Masses in the parish. Particularly in instances where the deceased does not have a large family or circle of friends, the presence of the daily Mass community is extremely consoling to the mourners. A core group of readers, eucharistic ministers, funeral choir, and servers may emerge from the daily Mass community.

PREACHING AND EULOGIES

1. Only a priest or deacon may preach the homily at the funeral liturgy.
2. A eulogy is not appropriate where a homily is prescribed (OCF #27), although examples from the person's life may be used in the homily. The literary genre of eulogy is not a homiletic form. Rather, the homily is to "illumine the mystery of Christian death in the light of the risen Christ." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1688) as proclaimed in the readings.
3. Excellence in preaching is of critical importance to the evangelizing task of the Church, especially at a moment when the faithful who live apart from the regular life of the Church may yearn for a message of faith and Christian hope.
4. One speaker of the family may offer a five-minute remembrance of the deceased at the Funeral Liturgy before the final commendation, especially if there was no vigil or wake service. The remarks are to be simple, brief, and prepared. Care must be taken to follow this. Some priests have found it helpful to see the text beforehand. Within the context of a liturgy, the tone should remain one of faith and hope.
5. The Vigil for the Deceased is a more fitting time for individuals to share remembrances of the deceased.

THE FUNERAL MASS

In the dioceses of the United States, the principal rituals in the *Order of Christian Funerals* are the Vigil for the Deceased, the Funeral Mass, and the Rite of Committal. The Funeral Mass is the central liturgy of the Christian funeral.

1. The Eucharist is the heart of the Paschal reality of Christian death (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1689). In the celebration of the Eucharist, the Church most perfectly expresses her communion with those who have died. The celebration of the Eucharist at the funeral is an opportunity for the community of the faithful, and for the family, to "learn to live in communion with the one who has 'fallen asleep in the Lord,' by communicating the Body of Christ of which he is a living member and, then, by praying for him and with him" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1689)
2. The Introductory Rites of the Funeral Mass presume a greeting of the mourners who accompany the body to the doors of the church. They are greeted by the priest and liturgical ministers, and other persons who have gathered at the church to await the procession from the funeral home or family home. The ritual plan for a parish must take into account the structure of the liturgy, the size of the assembly and the architecture of the church.
3. It is not ordinarily permitted to seat the family members who accompany the body before the body is presented for blessing. Parishes are called upon to develop, in collaboration with funeral directors, policies which result in seating on both sides of the church and towards the front of the assembly area.

THE FUNERAL LITURGY OUTSIDE MASS

It is the custom a priest or deacon to preside at the funeral liturgy when it is celebrated outside of Mass.

1. The Funeral Liturgy outside Mass (OCF #177-203) is celebrated when a Mass is not possible or not deemed appropriate. It is ordinarily celebrated in the parish church, but it may also be celebrated in the funeral home, the home of the deceased or cemetery chapel (OCF #179). The pastoral advice of the parish priest is essential in determining what is appropriate.
2. The family may choose to celebrate a funeral outside of Mass, and schedule a memorial Mass at a later date, when it is determined in consultation with the parish priest that this form of the funeral liturgy is a more suitable form of celebration.
3. When the funeral liturgy is celebrated outside Mass, the community nonetheless gathers to hear the message of Easter hope proclaimed in the liturgy of the word and to commend the deceased to God.
4. The readings are chosen from those approved for Masses for the Dead.
5. The *Order of Christian Funerals* includes the possibility of Holy Communion in this form of the liturgy.
6. Music is an essential element of this form of celebration, which includes the entrance or gathering song, the responsorial psalm, the gospel acclamation, and especially the song of farewell at the final commendation.

MUSIC IN THE FUNERAL LITURGY

It is the pastoral responsibility of parishes to provide liturgical music at all Funeral Masses. The same liturgical norms applied to music at any Mass apply to the Funeral Mass.

1. An instrumentalist, a cantor, and even a choir where possible should assist the full participation of the assembly in the songs, responses, and acclamations of the funeral Rites (OCF #33).
2. Certain musical texts are primary and should be sung at the Funeral Mass: the responsorial psalm, the gospel acclamation, the three acclamations of the Eucharistic Prayer, the “Lamb of God” litany, and the “Song of Farewell.” These should not be sung by cantor, choir, or soloist alone. Rather, they belong to the assembly.
3. In the *Order of Christian Funerals*, as in all the reformed liturgical books, the cantor/leader of song has an important task. The task of the cantor is to animate and direct the singing of the assembly. With the exception of the responsorial psalm, which is sung from the ambo, the cantor ordinarily leads the assembly from a cantor stand.
4. Some form of hymnal or worship program is called for at funerals. The program might be a computer-generated document with the words and music for the liturgy. Copyright licenses and permissions are necessary, and many parishes have found annual licenses to be both convenient and inexpensive. Some liturgical publishers have offered participation cards and booklets for the liturgy that have proven very useful. A separate sheet might be prepared for the participation of the faithful in the committal at the cemetery.

5. A choir has proven of great worth in many parishes. Members of a funeral choir are often recruited from parishioners who are retired, self-employed, or whose work gives them freedom of schedule.
6. The selection of music for the funeral liturgy is often a sensitive issue for bereaved families, parish musicians, and pastoral staff. The choice of music for Christian funerals must be in accord with all the recommendations governing music in liturgy, especially those found in the *Order for Christian Funerals*, *Liturgical Music Today* and *Music in Catholic Worship*.
7. The principle of progressive solemnity, described in *Music in Catholic Worship*, applies to the rites found in the *Order of Christian Funerals*. A few things sung well, (cf. #2 above) have priority in funeral liturgies (*Liturgical Music Today*, #33). Many of these may be drawn from the repertoire of the Sunday assembly.
8. The responsorial form of psalm singing, in which the psalmist or choir sings the verses and the assembly responds with a brief antiphon, is well suited to the funeral liturgy. The practice of substituting metrical hymns based on psalm texts for the responsorial psalm is not encouraged since this form affects and alters the ritual pattern of responsorial singing (*Liturgical Music Today*, #40).
9. The request for “favorite songs” of the deceased often result in inappropriate performances of music incapable of bearing the weight liturgy demands. Popular songs, sentimental ethnic music, or songs from Broadway hits are never to substitute for the music of the funeral liturgy. There are three standards of judgment proposed in *Music in Catholic Worship*. The liturgical judgment: is the music’s text, form, placement and style congruent with the nature of the liturgy? (*MCW* 30-38) The musical judgment: is the music technically, aesthetically and expressively good irrespective of musical idiom or style? (*MCW* 26-29) The pastoral judgment: will it help this assembly to pray? (*MCW* 39-41) Such a process may not be as easy to apply as an absolute list of permitted or prohibited music, but is more effective pastorally.
10. Music is preeminent among the signs expressed by the participants in any liturgy. Therefore, recorded music is not to be used within the liturgy to replace the congregation, the choir, the organist, cantor, or other musicians. (*Liturgical Music Today*, #60).

THE RITE OF COMMITTAL

The Rite of Committal is celebrated at the place of burial or interment and never in the church.

1. The Rite of Committal, whether at an interment chapel, at a mausoleum or at a graveside, is a gathering of the faithful for prayer.
2. Military services and certain cultural or social rites are permissible at the cemetery. These other services should be arranged in advance with the local parish priest and coordinated in such a way that they do not disrupt or distract from the integrity of the liturgical committal service. Funeral directors are called upon to assist in the coordination of these elements, and to safeguard the integrity of the Church’s liturgy at the Rite of Committal.
3. If a lengthy time has passed since the celebration of the Funeral Liturgy, or if the funeral has been conducted overseas or in a distant state, the Rite of Committal with Final Commendation (*OCF* #224-233) may be more appropriate.

CREMATION

While the Church recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the dead be observed, cremation is permitted as long as it has not been chosen for reasons contrary to Catholic teaching (Canon 1176.3, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2301).

1. It is preferred that the Funeral Mass or the Funeral Liturgy outside Mass be celebrated in the presence of the body of the deceased prior to its cremation. (*OCF Appendix Cremation*, #411-438).
2. The significance of having the body of the deceased present for the funeral liturgy is indicated throughout the Mass texts and ritual actions. Therefore, when arrangements involving cremation are being made, the parish priest is to recommend that: a) following a wake, or a time of visitation, the Funeral Liturgy be celebrated in the presence of the body of the deceased person, and that following the Funeral Liturgy, the body of the deceased be cremated; b) the Funeral Mass conclude with the final commendation in the church; c) at an appropriate time, usually some days later, the family gather at the cemetery for the burial of the cremated remains. The Rite of Committal takes place at this time with the inclusion of the proper prayers for the committal of ashes (*OCF #406.3*).
3. If cremation has already taken place before the Funeral Liturgy, the Pastor may permit the celebration of the Funeral Liturgy in the presence of the cremated remains of the deceased person. The cremated remains of the body are to be placed in a worthy vessel. Parishes may wish to invest in a parish ossuary (a receptacle in which the funeral urn or box is placed). A small table or stand is to be prepared for the cremated remains at the place normally occupied by the coffin. The funeral urn or ossuary may be carried to its place in the entrance procession or placed on this table sometime before the liturgy begins.
4. Special circumstances occur, such as health concerns or out-of-state or overseas transport, which prompt families to arrange for cremation before making funeral arrangements. If cremation has taken place, the parish priest is to recommend: a) gathering with family and friends for prayer and remembrance of the deceased; b) celebration of a Funeral Liturgy; c) gathering with family and friends for the interment of cremated remains at the cemetery in the Rite of Committal.
5. Cremated remains should be treated with the same respect given to the remains of a human body, and should be entombed or buried, whether in the ground or at sea. The *scattering* of cremated remains on the ground or on the sea or keeping any portion of them for personal reasons is not the reverent final disposition that the Church directs. It should be noted that burial at sea of cremated remains differs from scattering. An appropriate and worthy container, heavy enough to be sent to its final resting place, may be dropped into the sea.

CUSTOMARY OFFERINGS

1. Customary offerings may be accepted by the parish on the occasion of a funeral. The offerings that are given are to be placed in the parish account (cf. *Diocesan Policy Handbook*).

2. The offering on the occasion of a funeral does not include the professional fees for an organist, cantor, or other support services, unless this is part of the employment agreement for the professional musicians. Fees for musicians should be established on the parish level by the pastor in consultation with the musicians involved. Each parish is to have a plan for assisting families with financial hardship. Priests and deacons whose responsibilities include the spiritual care of patients or residents at various institutions and hospitals may want to initiate action for charity burials when the deceased has no relatives to do this. Funeral directors should be informed that no offering is expected from the poor or those unable to afford an offering.

MINISTRY OF CONSOLATION

The establishment of a bereavement ministry is encouraged for every parish of the diocese.

1. A bereavement ministry is a part of the ministry of the Church. “Those who are baptized into Christ and nourished at the same table of the Lord are to be responsible for each other” (*OCF* #8). This ministry of mutual charity, caring for others in sickness, death, and mourning, is a call to every believer - priest, deacon, religious, layperson. The responsibility of the bereavement ministry rests with the community, which is to be instructed in this care by pastors, associate pastors, and other ministers.
2. The ministry of bereavement extends beyond the time of the funeral to include the days and weeks after Christian burial.