

What You Need to Know About Catholic Funerals



What We Believe

"Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

If you have ever wondered why Catholics have certain rituals and practices at the time of death, then you are not alone. Our faith in the Paschal Mystery (the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ) reveals itself through the dying and death of each Christian. The following points are designed to invite reflection upon the meaning of what we do and believe at the time of a Christian's death. We also hope that this section will act as a guide for you to better understand and appreciate our beliefs and practices.

In facing death, we are reminded that God has created each person for eternal life. We celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a person's life, which has now been returned to the Author of Life. At the death of a Christian, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased. We are confident in the conviction that death is not the end nor does it break the bonds of family, friendship and community that are forged in life.

The Church through its funeral rites commends the dead to God's merciful love and pleads for the forgiveness of their sins. The celebration of the Christian funeral brings hope and consolation to the living.

In the Eucharistic sacrifice, the Church celebrates Christ's Passover from death to life and our participation in this great mystery. The faith of all the baptized is renewed and nourished in this celebration. The intimate connection between the baptism of the Christian into the death and resurrection of Christ and the Eucharistic celebration is one

of the main reasons for offering the Mass for the deceased.

In summary, we believe that in celebrating the funeral rites, we affirm and express the union of the Church on earth with the Church in heaven in the one great communion of saints. Though separated from the living, the dead are still at one with the community of believers on earth and benefit from their prayers and intercession. In the gathering of the community of believers with the community of saints in heaven, we offer our prayers through the person of Jesus Christ in the greatest prayer of the Church, which is the Eucharist.

Why Catholics Bury Their Dead With Dignity

When we are baptized we believe that our bodies are marked with the seal of the Holy Trinity. Since we are temples of the Holy Spirit we respect and honor the bodies of the dead and their places of rest.

The customs associated with the preparation of the body of the deceased are always marked with dignity and reverence and never with the despair of those who have no hope. Therefore, in the presence of the deceased, we turn to prayer. In this time of sorrow it is through prayer that we receive the necessary grace and consoling assurances of our faith.

For the final disposition of the body, it is the ancient Christian custom to bury or entomb the bodies of the dead in a consecrated and holy place.

Who Can Receive the Rites of Christian Burial

Catholics may receive the rites of Christian burial within the Eucharistic gathering. Members of other Christian faith traditions usually receive the funeral rites of their own Church; however, they may also receive the rite of Christian burial in the Catholic Church but outside of the Mass. A Christian burial service, commendation, and committal at the graveside may be offered for them.

The Three Stations of Christian Burial

When a member of the faithful has died the Church identifies three stations, or time periods, for the celebration of the rite of Christian burial:

The Vigil (Wake) - usually held on the night before the funeral

The celebration of the Eucharist (Mass) - on the day of the funeral

The Committal (the place of internment, burial and mourning) - immediately following

the funeral

The Vigil Service

The Vigil for the deceased, commonly known as the Wake, is the initial rite celebrated by the Christian community at the time following death and before the funeral liturgy and the rite of committal.

The Vigil usually takes place in a funeral home. It may also take place in the family home or in the parish church, as local custom dictates.

The celebration of the Vigil is the time for the Christian community to offer both prayer and consolation to the members of the bereaved family; to read and reflect on the Word of God; to call upon our God of Mercy through intercessory prayer; and to provide an opportunity for family and friends to recall the memory of their loved one. Other prayers, such as the Rosary, are also encouraged since they help us to reflect upon the Paschal Mystery and so lead us to a greater sense of hope at this time of grief. However, the Rosary should normally be prayed outside of the Vigil service for ecumenical purposes.

The Mass of Christian Burial

For Catholics the celebration of the Mass is both the source and the summit of our faith. Hence, when we celebrate the Mass at the time of death it is seen as the fullest expression of our faith in God's abundant mercy, our hope in the resurrection of the dead, and the love that God has for us, which is not extinguished even by death.

As an expression of our faith in Jesus Christ we actively participate in the Funeral Mass. Family members may choose the Scripture reading for the Mass, cover the casket with the pall, place Christian symbols on the casket (crucifix, bible), present the bread and wine at the preparation rite, and help select hymns for the community to sing.

Members of the parish community also participate in the funeral liturgy and join with the bereaved family in the celebration of the funeral rites by proclaiming the Word, leading the faithful in song, serving at the altar and if needed, helping with the distribution of communion.

A priest or deacon preach at the Funeral Mass. By preaching on Jesus Christ, who conquered death by His victory on the cross, our faith offers consolation to the family in their loss and challenges the community to live more faithful lives.

A eulogy differs from a homily and consists of a reflection on the life of the deceased and how this person touched the lives of others. The sharing of memories with Christian charity, good discretion, and warm humor are appropriate elements for a eulogy.

Eulogies may be shared at the Vigil. However, if the parish pastor agrees, a family member or friend may share one brief written eulogy not more than five minutes after the communion rite at Mass. Please review our Guidelines for Eulogies.

The Rite of Committal

The Rite of Committal is celebrated at the place of burial. In the committal of the body to its place of rest, we express our hope that the deceased will experience the glory of the resurrection. The committal must always be celebrated immediately following the funeral, unless a good pastoral reason dictates otherwise, such as travel to a distant cemetery. In the case of cremation, the cremated remains of the deceased must always be immediately interred in a consecrated burial site.

What is Special About Catholic Cemeteries?

Since the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, the Catholic Church has always set aside ground that is blessed and consecrated by God for the specific purpose of providing Christians with a dignified and holy resting place. The sacred nature of cemeteries is directly related to the Church's belief in the resurrection of the body and the final consummation of the world.

Who Can Be Buried in a Catholic Cemetery?

Baptized Catholics may be buried in a Catholic cemetery. Non-practicing Catholics or Catholics who may have joined another Christian denomination also deserve the prayers of the Church. Likewise, Non-Catholic spouses and other family members of Catholics may be buried in a Catholic cemetery. Many Catholic cemeteries have a reserved area for the burial of unborn children.

Is Cremation Allowed in the Catholic Church?

While the Church encourages burial of the body, after the manner of Christ's own burial, out of respect for the human body and belief in the resurrection, cremation may be chosen for a sufficient reason, such as:

Hygienic or other reasons of a public nature.

Transfer of the remains to/from a distant place.

Avoidance of considerable expense.

It was the specific choice of the individual before death or the family after death.

When cremation is designated, the funeral rites are conducted in the usual way with the body present and cremation taking place after the celebration of the Funeral Mass at the church.

In unusual circumstances when the bodily remains are cremated before the Funeral Mass, we still celebrate the Mass with the cremated remains present in the church and with the appropriate ritual adaptations. The cremated remains are always buried or interred. They are not buried on private land but in consecrated ground in a cemetery. In the case of military burials, the urn may be buried at sea. It is not proper to scatter or pour the cremated remains over the sea, water, or on the land. This action does not give due respect to the remains of the deceased, nor does it allow for the closure and healing of family and friends. Likewise, housing the remains with family or friends and not placing the deceased in the ground, does not offer loved ones a specific and sacred place to visit the Christian. Visiting the deceased in a holy place provides believers with a space to offer prayers, commune with the those who have gone before us in faith, and reminds us to await the resurrection of our own bodies.

Final Thoughts on Catholic Funerals

Contact your parish priest when your loved one is seriously ill and ask him to visit him/her. When the priest arrives, normally he will administer the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick and give your loved one Communion (Viaticum, "food for the journey," is the term denoting the last time one receives the Eucharist). When appropriate he will pray the prayers for the commendation of the dying. If death has already occurred he will pray the prayers for the dead.

It is good to plan ahead of time. Many funeral homes and cemeteries have advanced planning. Talk to your parish priest about what is and what is not permitted at funerals.

At times when death catches us off guard we may not always remember that the Funeral Rites are liturgical rites of the Church. Therefore, please understand if the priest cannot accommodate some requests, such as a specific poem, song or article that was your loved one's favorite. There are other moments outside of the liturgy, such as the Wake, when you can share these things with your family and friends.

Funerals are a special time for God's grace and mercy, a time to open your heart, receive His blessings and place your hope in the resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Ref.: <http://www.stbrigidofkildare.org/Funeral/funeralbeliefs1.htm>