



# Guidelines on Catholic Funerals

## Introduction

The Funeral for a deceased Catholic should normally be celebrated in the Catholic Church of the deceased person's parish. The family of the deceased, the Catholic Priest, and the funeral director chosen by the family, cooperatively arrange the date, time, and details for the Catholic services. It is never too soon to begin planning.

The Mystery of Death and Resurrection is at the heart of Christian belief. The Catholic Funeral Rites reflect hope in Eternal Life through Jesus Christ (John 3:15-16, 36); spiritual support for the deceased's soul and prayers for the comfort of their surviving loved ones (2 Maccabees 12:39-45; Psalms 119:49-50; Isaiah 40:1-2; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18); honoring the body (Tobit 1:17; Sirach 38:16); and the love of God manifest in Christ (Romans 8:38-39). These Rites enable the Christian community both to mourn and to hope, by focusing on the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ.

## Visit by a Priest Prior to Death

Whenever possible, a Catholic Priest should be called to visit a Catholic who is in danger of death, due to illness, injury, or old age. In the Catholic Faith, it is very important for the Priest to administer sacramental prayers prior to death (see James 5:14-15). Please contact a Catholic Priest as soon as there is risk of death, regardless of day or hour, so the Priest may administer the Anointing of the Sick and offer special prayers.

Calling the Priest in advance also allows the Catholic and the family, if they desire at that time, to begin to peacefully discuss their wishes regarding the funeral services for the time when the Lord does call them home.

## Prayers at the Time of Death

The Priest is also ready to come at the very time of passing, in order to pray with and comfort the family and to help commend the soul of the deceased into the hands of God.

## Services before the Funeral

There are several options for Catholic services conducted prior to the Funeral. The family may choose to host a Vigil for the Deceased, pray the Rosary, and have a time of Visitation. Any or all of these may be arranged. They are typically scheduled the evening before the Funeral, or, in some cases, on the morning of the Funeral.

Frequently, a period of about 2 hours is reserved for the Visitation, during a part of which the Vigil for the Deceased or the Rosary (or both) may be prayed. For example, the announcement in the obituary might state: "Visitation will be from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.,

with the Rosary for the Deceased at 6:30 p.m."

The services before the Funeral typically take place at the Funeral Home or at the family home.

It is during this time of Visitation, rather than during the Funeral Liturgy, that eulogies, sharing about the deceased, the reading of testimonies and literary excerpts, and reflections with contemporary music is appropriate.

**A. The Vigil for the Deceased.** This Catholic prayer service is the principal Rite celebrated by the Church after death and before the Funeral Liturgy. It includes prayers and Scripture readings that have been prepared by the Church for this occasion and lasts about twenty minutes. In coordination with the Priest, Deacon, or Pastor's designee, family members or friends may proclaim one of the prescribed Scripture readings and assist with the Intercessory Prayers. During the Vigil, family members or friends may speak in remembrance of the deceased. The Parish is available to help plan the details.



**B. The Rosary.** The recitation of the Rosary, which lasts about twenty minutes, may be led by a family member or, if desired, by the Priest, Deacon, or Pastor's designee. The Rosary is particularly appropriate when the deceased had a devotion to praying it.

**C. The Visitation (Viewing/Wake).** This is the time scheduled for family and friends to pay their last respects to the deceased and for friends to convey their personal condolences to the family.

If desired, the Sacrament of Reconciliation can be requested for any Catholic members of the family.

## The Funeral

There are two options for the Catholic Funeral ceremony: (A) The Funeral Mass, which is also referred to as the Mass of Christian Burial and is always the preferred option, or (B) The Funeral Liturgy outside Mass, which may be more suitable when, for example, the deceased was the only Catholic member of the family.



**A. The Funeral Mass.** The Holy Mass is the highest form of prayer in the Catholic Church, and a special Liturgy for the Funeral Mass is provided. In its celebration, the Church most perfectly expresses her communion with those who have died and prays for their soul's passage and for the solace of their loved ones. The Mass typically lasts about one hour.

The Funeral Mass is celebrated in a Catholic Church (not at the Funeral Home).

Please call the deceased's Parish, or the nearest Catholic Church, and they will help you coordinate a day and a time.

In every celebration for the dead, the Church attaches great importance to the reading of the Word of God. The Mass includes pre-selected readings from Sacred Scripture that are appropriate for this occasion. Options are provided from the Old Testament ("First Reading"), the Psalms ("Responsorial Psalm," which is typically sung), the New Testament ("Second Reading"), and the Gospels ("Gospel"). Additional options for the First Reading are available during the Easter Season.

The family may meet with the Priest to select from the optional readings and to designate the readers, or they can defer to his selection of readings and to a regular Parish reader. As desired, one, two, or three family members or friends may assist with proclaiming the Scripture readings and with the Intercessions. The Priest always proclaims the Gospel. Those whom the family wishes to assist in this ministry should meet with the Priest or Pastor's designee for assignment of readings and preparation for fulfilling this role during the Mass.

The Funeral Mass begins at the doors of the Church, and, after the Priest's blessing of the body (in the closed casket), a family member may place the Pall (the long white cloth) on the casket, or the staff of the funeral home may assist with this. See also Items on the Casket, below.

Other details of the Funeral Mass should be discussed with the Priest.

**B. The Funeral Liturgy outside Mass.** The Catholic Funeral Liturgy celebrated outside Mass begins in the same way as the Funeral Mass and follows a similar format for Scripture Readings and prayers, though without the Eucharistic Prayer, Holy Communion, and the other prayers specific to the Mass. This Liturgy may be celebrated in any Church or Chapel and typically lasts about half an hour.

When this Funeral option is selected, a "Memorial Mass" on another day should also be requested (at any Catholic Church) and be celebrated (with or without the family present) as soon as possible, since, as mentioned, the Mass is the highest form of Catholic prayer.

### **Rite of Committal**

Just as Jesus hallowed the grave by His own burial after His death on the Cross, so Christians honor our loved ones by burial. Thus, after the Funeral, the Priest and the family accompany the deceased's remains to their final resting place. There, special prayers are said to bless the place of burial and to commit the loved one's soul to God.

## **Cremation**

Every person is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27), with unity of body and soul. Thus, both in life and in death Christians treat the human body with great respect and at death bury the body, just as the Lord's body was entombed (Mt 27:57-61; cf. Gen 23; Eccl 6:3).

The Catholic Church does, however, allow cremation of a body when there is a good reason, as long as it is not done for non-Christian reasons. All of the same services should be celebrated as described above, and whenever possible the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy outside Mass should be celebrated in the presence of the body of the deceased prior to its cremation. Later, after the cremation, the Rite of Committal is conducted at the place of interment. Interment may be either by burial in a cemetery or entombment in a mausoleum.

In the rare event when cremation does occur prior to the Funeral, the remains are still brought to the Church for the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy outside Mass and are honored just as the body would be honored.

The cremated remains should not be scattered or kept in a home or elsewhere, but should be honored just as the body would be, with formal interment and the prayerful solemnity of the Rite of Committal as soon as possible (see Sir 38:16; 1 Cor 6:19).

## **Other Aspects of a Catholic Funeral**

**1. Day of the Week and Time.** In the Diocese of Savannah, Catholic Funerals are not normally celebrated on Sundays. A Catholic Funeral and burial may be celebrated on any day other than Sunday, excluding Holydays of Obligation and the following solemn days of Holy Week (i.e., the week before Easter): Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday.

Priests are also usually not available on the day of the Chrism Mass, which in the Diocese of Savannah is normally celebrated on the Tuesday of Holy Week.

The Visitation, Vigil for the Deceased, and/or Rosary may be scheduled on weekdays and on a Saturday, as well as on a Sunday evening. However, a conflict with the local Mass times, especially on Saturday afternoons and evenings and Sunday evenings, should be avoided.

At Sacred Heart, the Funeral is customarily celebrated at 11:00 a.m. on any day from Monday through Friday.

The day and time for each of the services should be coordinated with the Priest to assure his availability and that of the Church.

**2. Music.** Appropriate music for Catholic funerals includes liturgical hymns that would

otherwise be appropriate for Holy Mass and focus upon the paschal mystery of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection and support the Christian faith of those present. Thus, the lyrics should be related to readings from Sacred Scripture or the prayers of the Liturgy. The piano is the preferred liturgical instrument at Sacred Heart. While popular non-religious songs may be played during the Visitation, they are not used at the Funeral Mass, the Funeral Liturgy outside Mass, or the Vigil for the Deceased. Hymn selection may be discussed with the Priest or the Pastor's designee ahead of time or simply left to him to prepare with the pianist. See also Costs and Fees, below.

**3. Flowers.** If desired, flowers may be appropriate at the Funeral Home. At the Church, flowers are a decoration that is governed by the liturgical norms. Coordinating with the Priest during the liturgical seasons of Christmas, Easter, and Ordinary Time, at the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy outside Mass, flowers used in moderation may be placed near the Altar or doors of the Church. However, due to the penitential character of the seasons, during Advent, Lent, and Holy Week placing flowers on the Altar of the Church would not be appropriate. See also Items on the Casket, below.



**4. Pictures.** If desired, pictures of the deceased may be appropriate in the viewing room at the Funeral Home. At the Church or Chapel, the transcendent images of faith already in place there direct our hearts and minds to the Lord Himself and to the Communion of Saints in Heaven, to whom we are commending our deceased loved one. Thus, during the Funeral Mass or Catholic Funeral Liturgy outside Mass, any desired picture of the deceased would be placed in the narthex of the Church or Chapel, usually near the guest book. See also Items on the Casket, below.

**5. Items on the Casket.** At the doors of the Church or Chapel, flowers and flag, if any, are removed from the casket, and the Funeral Mass or Catholic Funeral Liturgy outside Mass begins. The Pall, a long white cloth which is a reminder of the baptismal garment of the deceased and a sign of their Christian dignity, is placed on the casket. The family may place the Pall on the casket (the Priest or Deacon will indicate when to do so), or the Funeral Home staff will be happy to assist with this. Typically, no other items are placed on the casket. Coordinating with the Priest, it is permissible, however, after the Pall is on the casket and while the casket is stationary to place a Christian symbol on the casket, such as a Bible or a Cross. See also Military Honors, below.

**6. Military Honors.** In recognition of service in the armed forces, military honors may be accorded to the deceased at the cemetery. Before the pallbearers carry the casket into the Church or Chapel, national flags and other insignia of associations are removed. The Liturgy then begins with the Introductory Rites, sprinkling with Holy Water, placing of the Pall on the casket, and Entrance Procession. At the conclusion of the Liturgy, after the Recessional Procession the Pall is removed at the doors of the Church, and the flag (or flowers) may be replaced on the casket.

**7. Costs and Fees.** It is customary for the family to compensate the priest, deacon, pianist, and cantor for their services at the customary local rate. Special consideration will be given in cases of hardship.

**8. Other Questions.** The Priest is always happy to answer any other questions not covered by this Guide.

May the Lord Jesus Christ, Shepherd of Souls, be with you in a special way at this time. May perpetual Light shine upon our loved ones and may they rest in peace.