What Non-Catholics Should Know About Attending a Catholic Funeral Service

If you are attending a Catholic funeral service for the first time, you likely have some questions about what to expect. Catholic funerals have three parts, including a burial service.

Vigil

The vigil happens before the funeral, usually at the funeral home chapel or Catholic Church. During this part of the funeral tradition, friends and family pay respects to the person who has passed away. Typically, there is an open casket, and loved ones kneel before the casket as they enter the vigil space to say a prayer for the deceased. The vigil is also a time for people to offer their condolences and support to the surviving family members. A priest is usually present at the vigil and leads a short prayer. During the vigil, family members and friends may also offer eulogies.

Mass

The funeral Mass is typically held the day after the vigil. In addition to including both the liturgies of the Word and the Eucharist, the Mass also features prayers for the deceased’s soul, so that it may rise to heaven, in keeping with the Catholic faith. During the Mass, non-Catholics traditionally do not take the Eucharist, but they may process to the front of the church as people are taking communion to receive a blessing from the priest. To do so, simply cross your arms over your chest and bow your head as you approach the priest. Eulogies are traditionally not included in Catholic funeral masses, though some churches have loosened these restrictions and will allow them before the opening prayer, or after communion.
Burial

The final part of Catholic funeral rites is a burial. The Church now also permits cremation, but the cremains must be properly interned and not distributed among family members, scattered, or turned into jewelry or other items. At the Catholic cemetery, the priest will say a final prayer, bless the grave and casket, and sprinkle the casket with holy water. After the burial, there is usually a reception for family and friends at a home or restaurant.

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