

## Burying the Dead: Catholic Funerals



*Wisdom 1:12-14 "Seek not death in the error of your life, neither procure ye destruction by the works of your hands. For God made not death, neither hath He pleasure in the destruction of the living. For He created all things that they might be: and he made the nations of the earth for health: and there is no poison of destruction in them, nor kingdom of hell upon the earth."*

*I Corinthians 15:51-58 "Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall all indeed rise again: but we shall not all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet: for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall rise again incorruptible. And we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption: and this mortal must put on immortality. And when this mortal hath put on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? Now the sting of death is sin: and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who hath given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast and unmoveable: always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."*

The first thing to remember about Catholic funerals is the Truth that the body of the dead one will be resurrected and reunited with the soul when Jesus comes again at the Last Judgement. In addition, if the deceased is saved, his body will be glorified. For this reason, the bodies of our loved ones are treated with the utmost respect and, so, it is against Catholic custom to cremate the body, having been allowable in the past only during times of pestilence, for ex., when cremation was done for the common good. Now, however, the 1983 Code of Canon Law (Can. 1176 §3) reads

The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burial be retained; but it does not forbid cremation, unless this is chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching.

Some reasons that are contrary to Christian teaching are, for ex., those behind the promotion of cremation by those with an anti-Catholic agenda. From Fr. John Laux's, *Catholic Morality (Imprimatur 1932)*:

On December 8, 1869, the International Congress of Freemasons imposed it as a duty on all its members to do all in their power to wipe out Catholicity from the face of the earth. Cremation was proposed as a suitable means to this end, since it was calculated to gradually undermine the faith of the people in "the resurrection of the body and life everlasting."

Russell D. Moore writes,<sup>1</sup> For Christians, burial is not the disposal of a thing. It is caring for a person. In burial, we're reminded that the body is not a shell, a husk tossed aside by the "real" person, the soul within. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6–8; Phil. 1:23), but the body that remains still belongs to someone, someone we love, someone who will reclaim it one day.

Our father Abraham did not “dispose” of the “container” previously occupied by his loved one. Moses tells us that “Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan” (Gen. 23:19, emphasis mine). His burial of his wife, returning her to the dust from which she came, honored our foremother, in precise distinction from the shamefulness with which our God views the leaving of bodies to decompose publicly (Is. 5:25).

The Gospel of John tells us that “Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days” (John 11:17). The Holy Spirit chose to identify this body as Lazarus, communicating continuity with the very same person Jesus had loved before and would love again.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, the Gospels present us with an example of devotion to Jesus in the way the women—and Joseph of Arimathea—minister to him, anointing him with spices, specifically anointing, Mark tells us, him and not just “his remains” (Mark 16:1), and wrapping him in a shroud. Why is Mary Magdalene so grieved when she finds the tomb to be empty? It is not that she doubts that a stolen body can be resurrected by God on the last day. It is instead that she sees violence done to the body of Jesus as violence done to him, dishonor done to his body as dishonor to him. When Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener, she tells him she is despondent because they “have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him” (John 20:13). This body was, at least in some sense, still her Lord, and it mattered what someone had done to it. Jesus and the angelic beings never correct the devoted women. They simply ponder why they seek the living among the dead.

If one defies tradition and the Church's earnest recommendation and does opt for cremation, or if one reasonably cremates because of the threat of disease, the remains must still be interred at a cemetery; they can't be kept at one's home or be scattered.

The second thing to remember is that our relationship with our dead Christian loved ones isn't dissolved by death; we pray for our dead in case they are in Purgatory for a while, and ask them to pray for us.

When a loved one physically dies, the *first thing* a Catholic should do is call his priest, and then the funeral home if one is used. Know, though, that chances are good that you can do much of the funeral -- casket-building, preparing the body for the Vigil (embalming is most often not necessary or legally required), transportation of the body to the church and cemetery, burial, etc. - - yourself, avoiding sterile, often Protestant or Novus Ordo funeral homes altogether, with their no food/drink/smoking signs, set "visiting hours," banal and non-Catholic "Wind Beneath My Wings" piped-in music, and strange blend of "Office" and "Bad Taste Rococo" aesthetics. By handling as much as you can yourself, you can instead have a truly Catholic and relaxed atmosphere for the Vigil, ensure that your loved one is treated with the utmost dignity at all times, and give your loved one the gift of caring for him after death -- which helps many with their grief, and saves, literally, thousands of dollars in the process.<sup>2</sup>

At any rate, please consider *now*, while you and your family members are healthy, the ways you will handle funerals in the future. They've become such spiritually impoverished, sterile affairs -- and so incredibly expensive (US\$5,000 to \$10,000 is supposed to be a "good deal") -- that the death of a loved one can be spiritually devastating and bring tremendous financial pressure to the survivors. If a do-it-yourself funeral appeals to you, learn about them *now*, start preparing caskets, learn the laws of your State and what -- if any -- permits might be required, etc.

If one attends a parish or chapel in which there are no problems receiving all the Sacraments in the traditional way, arranging a traditional Requiem Mass shouldn't be a problem. If one attends a parish where the Mass is offered by indult, the ability to have a traditional Requiem Mass is, sadly, left up to the whims of the diocese's Ordinary (Bishop), and quite a few of them might allow the traditional Mass once in a while, but won't allow a Requiem Mass or traditional Sacraments. Traditional Catholics must consider their situation and plan for it as far ahead of time as possible; dying as a traditional Catholic is often even more difficult than living as one these days.

By the way, if anyone wants to eulogize the dead, the Vigil or, especially, the after-burial gathering are the times to do it; eulogies are not permitted at the traditional Requiem Mass. This seems to enrage many people because it's a very common thing in Protestant, secular America, and is, sadly, common at Novus Ordo Masses in some dioceses, but eulogies in a church can (and do) lead to serious problems. The very word, "eulogy," means "high praise" -- but what if the deceased wasn't so wonderful and not so repentant? Should we speak the Truth of the dead by speaking ill of him, or lie, in a church, for the sake of politeness and decorum, thereby endangering souls who hear typical words that intimate the person is most definitely, without a doubt in Heaven, right now, even though they know that he was a philanderer, a cheat, or a thief who may not have repented? Eulogizers are often theologically ignorant, saying things that are simply not consistent with Catholic doctrine or that lead one to believe that Purgatory and Hell do not exist, etc. In addition, eulogies are often quite personal and quirky, with the deceased having requested in life that secular, sometimes vulgar, music be played to remember them by, and such things as that -- things that are best left for the intimacy of a wake or post-burial gathering, not the liturgy, which is always, by *definition*, for the public and an act of *the Church*. Most of all, how can we give "high praise" to an unglorified human being when, in a church, we are in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament? Think about this and you will see the Church's wisdom.

At any rate, a traditional Catholic funeral consists of three main parts: the Vigil (sometimes called the "Wake"), the Requiem Mass, and the Burial and informal after-burial gatherings. Note that the following pertains to funerals for adults; funerals for baptized children who've not yet reached the age of reason are quite different and joyful because they, without a doubt, go straight to Heaven, not having had the opportunity to commit a mortal sin. In childrens' funerals, the priest wears white, the Gloria Patri is not replaced with the Requiem aeternam, the Gloria in excelsis is said, etc. Their Mass is not a Requiem Mass, but a "Votive Mass of the Angels" (or the Mass of the day if a votive Mass is not allowed that particular day).

## **The Vigil (Wake)**

The Vigil most often takes place in a funeral home nowadays, though it could take place in a home, parish church or chapel, or other place, depending on the laws of your state and the practices of your parish or chapel. The Vigil is the time when family gathers around the dead one, first of all to pray for him, and also to remember his life, and console one another. If the wake takes place in a funeral home, funeral cards, a type of holy card, are usually present (ordered through the funeral home's funeral director), with a Catholic image on one side and, on the other, a prayer, and the name, birthdate, and (pray God) Heavenly birthdate, of the dead. If the wake is not held at a funeral home, one can still order custom-made funeral cards or make one's own.

The Vigil, which may last from a few hours to two days, has the very specific purpose of attending to the soul of the dead one. At the Vigil, therefore, prayer for the dead is central, and you should ask your priest to lead the mourners in the Rosary (Glorious Mysteries) for the soul of the departed (if no priest is available, you can, of course, pray the Rosary yourself as a group). Note that the following prayer, the "Eternal Rest" prayer, is prayed for the dead after each decade of the Rosary (where the Fatima Prayer is usually prayed):

Eternal rest grant unto him/her (them), O Lord; and let perpetual light shine upon him/her (them). May he/she (they) rest in peace. Amen.

Latin version: Réquiem aeternam:

Réquiem aeternam dona ei (eis) Dómine; et lux perpétua lúceat ei (eis). Requiéscat (Requiéscant) in pace. Amen.

(The Eternal Rest Prayer is a good prayer to pray when thoughts of the dead person come to mind in the years to come; many Catholics also pray this prayer when passing a cemetery, and also on All Souls Day, and add it to their Rosaries during the month of November, which is dedicated to the Holy Souls in Purgatory.)

During the Vigil, the casket is usually open, flanked by candles at both ends (one's Baptismal Candle should be used, if possible). In some Catholic cultures, mirrors are covered or turned toward the wall during this time. It is typical for Catholics to kiss their loved one goodbye, and being relic-minded and very conscious of the holiness of a Christian's body and its eternal relationship to the Christian's soul, to keep a lock of hair or some other memento which is later placed, along with funeral cards and the like, on the family altar. This will help remind them to pray for their loved one.

Flowers, as symbols of the beautifully transient, are always present, though some might request that, aside from a few representative flowers from closest family members, donations be made to selected charities instead of additional bouquets being bought. A Crucifix is, of course, always present, too, and often a Rosary will be placed in the dead person's hands.

### **For Visitors**

When you enter the place of the Vigil (you should dress modestly and somberly; black is traditional), you might find a visitors' sign-in book. Do sign it, as it is good for the mourners to see many names listed and to know that their loved one was cared for by many. These books are often used by the family in sending Thank You cards afterwards, and make this task much easier in having all the names and addresses in one place.

Then greet the mourners with words of sympathy and of hope in Christ Risen and Glorified. After this, you will go and kneel on the kneeler beside the coffin and pray for a few moments (or as long as you need). The length of time one "should" stay at a Vigil depends on his closeness to the dead one and the dead one's family. Immediate family would stay at the Vigil the entire time; casual friends can pay their respects with even a 10 minute visit and sincere prayers.

Food sent to the home of the mourners during the Vigil (if the Vigil is held at home), between the Vigil and the Mass, or after the burial, helping to care for little ones, the handling of chores, and other such kindnesses are best just done without asking instead of offered. While saying "if there is anything I can do..." is always sweet, it puts the mourner in the position of having to ask for a favor. Say those wonderful words, yes, but *also*, if you think of something the mourner might need to have done or that would lighten their spirits, *just do it*. In other words, instead of saying, "Do you want me to bring a cake," just bring one.

### **The Requiem Mass**

On the day following the Wake will come the Requiem Mass (non-Catholic visitors will find general information on how to behave at a Catholic Mass here). The body is taken from the place of the Vigil to the church or chapel as the bell with the deepest voice -- the "tenor bell" -- tolls, if possible. The body is taken toward the Altar, to just outside the sanctuary. It is placed feet toward the Altar if the body is that of a layman, and head toward the Altar if the body is that of a priest.

Generally speaking, the Requiem Mass is like other Masses but with the following differences: Incense is not burned at the Introit and Gospel, the *Judica Me*, *Gloria*, the kissing of the Book after the Gospel Reading, and Kiss of Peace in Solemn Masses are omitted.

The priest, dressed in a black cope, will greet the coffin at the door of the Church, sprinkling it with Holy Water, and intoning the De Profundis (Psalms 129) and the Miserere (Psalm 50). The Introit asks that eternal rest be given to the departed, and the Collect asks that God deliver his or her soul. The Epistle will be a reading of I Thessalonians 4:13-18, in which St. Paul speaks of death. After the Gradual, a Tract asking absolution from every bond of sin on the part of the deceased is intoned, followed by the glorious Sequence, the Dies Irae. The Gospel will be a reading of John 11:21-27, the story of St. Martha's profession of faith that her brother, Lazarus, will rise again. The Offertory prayer asks Jesus Christ, King of Glory, to deliver the souls of the faithful departed from Hell, and for St. Michael to lead them into the holy Light. The Secret asks pity on the soul of the departed. The Communion asks that light eternal shine on the departed, and the Postcommunion asks that the Sacrifice of the Mass purify the departed.

Afterwards, the priest, again vested in a black cope, stands at the foot of the coffin and grants the departed absolution, which is followed by the Responsory, *Libera Me*. A *Kyrie* is then chanted, followed by the *Pater*, during which the priest passes twice around the body, sprinkling it with holy water and incensing it. This is followed by a prayer asking that the holy angels bear the departed to paradise. As the body is carried out of church, the Antiphon *In Paradisum* is sung ("May the angels lead you into paradise: may the martyrs receive you at your coming, and lead you into the holy city, Jerusalem. May the choir of angels receive you, and with Lazarus, who once was poor, may you have everlasting rest.")

Note: It is customary to give the priest a stole fee for Requiem Masses, as it is customary to give him a stole fee for weddings and Baptisms. This isn't obligatory, of course -- noone ever has to pay for a Sacrament or a liturgical service, and the poor are exempt from this sort of etiquette -- but a stole fee -- also called a stipend or honorarium -- is an appreciated financial recognition of the priest's time and services. Remember that priests make next to nothing; any gift from his parishioners goes a long way. How much should one give? Some dioceses suggest amounts for such things as Baptisms, weddings, and Requiem Masses (and for votive Masses); you can call your chancery (or chapel, if you attend S.S.P.X. or other "non-indult" traditional Masses) and ask about it. Other dioceses might not have a prescribed amount, and you can simply ask fellow parishioners what might be a polite sum to give. As an example, in my diocese (Indianapolis), I was told that \$50 US was a customary amount (as of July, 2003) for a funeral Mass. My family gave our priest a little more because the cemetery was an hour outside the city, which called for him to drive a bit and burn gasoline in order to bless the grave, and because we like him.

## **Burial and Informal After-burial Gatherings**

After the Requiem Mass, the coffin is taken to the cemetery. The ground or mausoleum in which the body will be disposed should be blessed by a priest if the cemetery is not a proper Catholic cemetery (which is the ideal) or already blessed. This is done with these words as the grave and body are sprinkled with holy water and incensed.:

O God, by Your mercy rest is given to the souls of the faithful, be please to bless this grave. Appoint Your holy angels to guard it and set free from all the chains of sin and the soul of him (her) whose body is buried here, so that with all Thy saints he (she) may rejoice in Thee for ever. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

### *Latin:*

Deus, cujus miseratióne ánimæ fidélium requiéscunt, hunc túmulum benedícere dignáre, eíque Angelum tuum sanctum députa custódem: et quorum quarúmque córpora hic sepeliúntur, ánimas eórum ab ómnibus absólve vínculis delictórum; ut in te semper cum Sanctis tuis sine fine læténtur. Per Christum Dóminum nostrum. Amen..

Now the priest will intone the Cantic of Luke 1:68-79. This is followed by the Antiphon John 11:25-26 and by a short *Kyrie* while the priest prays the *Pater* silently and sprinkles the body with holy water. He again asks that the soul rest in peace, and ends with another prayer for mercy. It all ends with the following, said as the priest makes the Sign of the Cross over the body:

Réquiem æternam dona ei,  
Dómine.

Et lux perpétua lúceat ei.

Requiéscat in pace.

Amen.

Anima ejus, et ánimæ ómnium fidélium  
defunctorum, per misericórdiam Dei  
requiéscant in pace.

Amen.

Eternal rest grant unto him (her), O Lord.

And let perpetual light shune upon him (her).

May he (she) rest in peace.

Amen.

May his (her) soul, and the souls of all the  
faithful departed, through the mercy of God rest  
in peace.

Amen.

Traditionally, at least in Catholic cemeteries, the body of a layman is buried such that the head faces East, symbolizing their awaiting bodily resurrection by Christ, Who is called "Orient." Priests are buried in the opposite direction of the laity, symbolizing their having to confront the effects of their pastoring on the souls entrusted to them by God.

After the funeral, it is typical to gather at the house of the one closest to the departed, to eat, drink, remember, console one another, and pray (these informal post-burial gatherings are also sometimes referred to as "wakes." This isn't strictly accurate, but common usage). This is when bringing food and drink is especially appreciated, as it is in the days to come when the crowds go home -- but the survivors, still grieving, are beginning to confront the sad reality of their temporal loss. In fact, it tends to be the days *after* the funeral, when all the distractions of funeral arrangements and greeting people have vanished, that are most painful. Don't forget the mourners in the weeks that follow. Bring food by, take care of small chores for them, call them, let them cry and talk. And don't be afraid to mention the departed; though everyone is different, most mourners want -- *need* -- to talk about their loved one. After prayer, just providing an ear and encouraging the mourner to offer up his pain are often the best things you can do. Mention the person's name (or "the baby" in the case of miscarriage), remember the departed with the mourner, affirm the suffering the mourner is going through. Never, ever tell someone to "get over it" or that they've "got to move on," etc. Let *them* tell you how *they* feel; don't attempt to orchestrate, diminish, or ignore their emotions. The best way to deal with grief is to *go through it* - with faith and the support of people who *allow the mourner to mourn*.

### **Who may not have a Christian Burial**

Traditionally, Catholic funerals are denied to the unbaptized (note that catechumens, including infants whose parents planned on having them baptized, are baptized by desire, and that martyrs are baptized by blood); infidels; heretics; suicides (unless they were of unsound mind or showed signs of repentance); notorious, unrepentant sinners; the excommunicated; the schismatic; those under ecclesiastical censure; those who, without remorse, have openly held the sacraments in contempt; and those who've directed that their bodies be cremated.

(Note: The 1983 Code of Canon Law Can. 1183 §3 strangely allows for baptized heretics to be given a Catholic funeral "provided their own minister is not available" and assuming it isn't established that they wouldn't want a Catholic funeral, all at the discretion of the Bishop -- but then in Can. 1184 §1 goes to say that "notorious heretics" can't have a Catholic funeral. As opposed to out and out refusal of a Catholic funeral for those who request their bodies be cremated, Can. 1184 §1 says that Catholic funerals are denied to those "who for antichristian motives choose that their bodies be cremated.")

#### **Footnote:**

<sup>1</sup> Moore, Russell D., "Grave Signs," Touchstone Magazine, January/February, 2007

<sup>2</sup> See the book Caring for the Dead: Your Final Act of Love, Dewey Decimal# 393, ISBN# 0942679210 . The link is offsite, will open in new browser window. I quibble with the title; caring for your loved one's body isn't the "final" act of love! We pray for our dead for the rest of our lives!