

SHOULD WE HAVE A CATHOLIC FUNERAL?

*“As we renew our faith in your Son,
whom you raised from the dead,
strengthen our hope
that all our departed brothers and sisters
will share in his resurrection”*

Thus we pray at every Mass on “All Souls Day”. Praying for our deceased brothers and sisters reflects our Christian conviction that death is not the end of existence and that prayer to our merciful God on behalf of the dead will benefit both us and them.

It is sad, but it sometimes happens that the family of an elderly person with few surviving relatives and friends decides to forgo the funeral Mass. This is unfortunate because all baptised Catholics have a right to the Mass, even when the deceased may have had very little active involvement in the church for many years. All have a right when we die to the efficacious prayer of the Church.

The Christian life of the deceased person began in baptism and was nourished in the eucharist and encountered Christ in other sacraments of the Church. Now the community of faith (many of whom may have known and loved the deceased recently, many years ago, or not at all) has a responsibility to assemble to pray for the deceased. Without a Christian funeral, prayer for the dead is diminished; the opportunity to give witness to faith is removed; and the consolation and emotional relief deprived to those remaining. At every Funeral Mass we pray, “*Release him/her from sin and grant him/her the freedom of your perfect peace. May our brother/sister be with You in the glory of your kingdom on the last day.*” Would we not all want this prayer prayed for us?

Sometimes when death occurs after a loved one has been institutionalized for many years and families have already gone through a form of closure, the family does not see the necessity of a full Catholic funeral. Yet, the one who has died has a right to a parish funeral, regardless of the number of participants who might attend the funeral, and whether or not

the survivors feel the need of support in handling their loss.

Today, many small family-run funeral homes are facing great pressures to become competitive or to become part of large corporations. When they offer special “package deals” and pre-need selling, it makes it harder and harder for grieving relatives to make decisions regarding the funeral of their loved one. All funeral directors should encourage those making arrangements to have a funeral Mass for their deceased family member. Also, it is best to discuss all funeral arrangements first with one’s parish priest.

If one is making the final arrangements for oneself, one may be tempted to spare friends and relatives the pain and expense of long, elaborate funeral ceremonies. But it should be remembered that they may need this opportunity to express their loss and their support of one another. All Christian people, pastors and other pastoral ministers, as well as funeral directors should be encouraged to make full use of the richness of the traditional Catholic funeral and burial rites—for the sake of our beloved dead and for the sake of those who mourn their loss.

THE CATHOLIC FUNERAL

The Order of Christian Funerals guides the Catholic community with specific rites and prayers to express consolation and hope to those who grieve, to give thanks to God for the blessings received by and through the deceased and to ask God’s mercy on all sinners. It is designed to help confront death in light of the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. “In the face of death the Church confidently proclaims that God has created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, by his death and resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death that bound humanity.” (*The Order of Christian Funerals* [OCF] no. 1).

For Catholics a funeral has three distinct parts which give the bereaved time to accept the reality of death and express their sorrow, to reflect upon the life of the deceased and give thanks to God, and to pray in light of Jesus’ resurrection and find strength and consolation.

The Vigil

“At the death of a Christian, whose life was begun in the waters of Baptism and strengthened at the Eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of its confident belief that death is not the end nor does it break the bonds forged in life” (OCF, 4).

“The time immediately following death is often one of bewilderment and may involve shock or heartrending grief for the family and close friends. The ministry of the Church at this time is one of gently accompanying the mourners in their initial adjustment to the fact of death and to the sorrow this entails.... The members of the Christian community offer support to the mourners, especially by praying that the one they have lost may have eternal life” (OCF, 52).

The Vigil is generally held in a funeral home, but may be celebrated in the home, church or other suitable place (OCF, 83), and includes a reading of the Word of God and prayers for the deceased and those who mourn. This is the suitable occasion for sharing stories and remembrances of the deceased.

Why a Vigil? In time of loss the family and community turn to God’s Word as the source of faith and hope, as light and life in the face of darkness and death. The prayers call on God to bring the deceased into the communion of saints. The whole ceremony is reminiscent of the Easter Vigil when, in the darkened church, we await the glorious resurrection of the Lord.

Who participates in the Vigil? “Whenever possible the family of the deceased should take part in the selection of texts and music and designation of the liturgical ministers” (OCF, 93). A priest, a deacon or, in their absence, a lay person leads the community in prayer. Members of the local parish community are also encouraged to participate as a sign of concern and support for the mourners. For this reason the funeral notice in the newspaper may also list the time of the Vigil Service.

Even when the body of the deceased is buried shortly after death or was donated to science or medical research or is not

found, the family is encouraged to gather for a prayer vigil. A picture of the deceased may be placed on a table with some flowers and a candle.

In a society that prizes expediency, there is a growing trend to omit the vigil and proceed immediately to the funeral liturgy. The opportunity for family, friends and the Christian community to gather to remember the life of the deceased, express grief and offer comfort and consolation should be emphasized and valued as part of the ministry of Christ that the Church offers to the bereaved. Often the wishes of the deceased do not foresee the need for the family, immediate and extended, and for friends to face the reality of death and to begin the process of grieving and healing. The vigil is an important moment in the pastoral care for the living.

The Funeral Mass

“Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and hope of the just. The Mass, the memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral” (*OCF*, 5).

When planning a Funeral Mass, there are five important points to consider.

(1) The celebration of the Funeral Mass is highly encouraged for every deceased Catholic. The celebration of the Eucharist is not possible if a priest is unavailable, or if the Funeral occurs between Holy Thursday and Easter Sunday or on a Sunday or on a Holy Day of Obligation. In these cases a Mass is scheduled at another, convenient time (*OCF*, 296). If, due to extraordinary circumstances, families do not wish to have a Mass, they should consult with the parish priest before making arrangements with a funeral director (see *OCF*, 349). If there is serious reason not to celebrate the Mass, *The Order of Christian Funerals* states that the service without a Mass is “ordinarily” to be celebrated in the parish church (*OCF*, 350).

(2) There is an emphasis on the baptism of the deceased since it is through baptism in Jesus that each person receives the promise of eternal life. The white pall draped over the casket,

the holy water and the Easter candle are symbols of Christ’s life, which is bestowed through the waters of baptism.

(3) Requests for secular music cannot be accommodated during the Mass since the very nature of the Mass requires that the lyrics of the songs “express the mystery of the Lord’s suffering, death and triumph over death” (*OCF*, 30).

(4) The readings for Mass are to be taken from the Bible. The family may choose the readings but they may not be from any source other than Sacred Scripture.

(5) *The Order of Christian Funerals* prohibits a eulogy or words of remembrance in the context of Mass. A brief homily based on the readings is always given after the gospel reading at the funeral liturgy but there is never to be a eulogy” (*OCF*, 27). While a eulogy is intended to recall and even praise the deceased, a homily is directed to helping all who are gathered to understand the mystery of God’s love and how the mystery of Jesus’ victorious death and resurrection were present in the life of the deceased and are present in our lives as well.

Words of remembrance by a member of the family may be delivered at the time of the Vigil, the rite of committal at the cemetery or the reception. The family may also arrange a “remembrance service” to be held prior to the Funeral Mass, or they may print a souvenir leaflet with biographical and other details of the deceased’s life and achievements which may be distributed at the time of the funeral.

The Rite of Committal

“The rite of committal, the conclusion of the funeral rites, is celebrated at the grave, tomb, or crematorium and may be used for burial at sea”(*OCF*, 512). Prayers are offered to commit the body of the deceased to its final resting place. When the body has been or will be cremated, appropriate adaptations are made to the prayers of committal and signs of farewell.

mystery of our resurrection, let them share the joys and blessings of the life to come.”

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“Since our departed brothers and sisters believed in the

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“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” *John 11.25*

Archdiocese of Kingston

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