



Services for the Dead

Casket and Clothing

These are at the discretion of the family of the deceased. Chinoy Catholics usually do not use traditional Chinese clothing for their deceased loved ones, but they may do so. The clothing and whatever else is placed inside the casket should not have superstitious beliefs attached to them. At the moment of death we meet God our Creator and Judge. What will matter then is how we have lived our lives, not what we are wearing when we are buried.

Wake

The family decides the duration of the wake and the date of the funeral. Something has already been said about the matter of choosing dates. Catholics in the Philippines usually have Masses offered for the deceased for nine days (novena) after death. This tradition recalls the nine days that the apostles spent in prayer between Jesus' ascension and the descent of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost). The Holy Spirit is also known as the Consoler, and the nine days of prayers can be seen as prayers for the consolation of the bereaved.

These Masses are held during the wake, and then at the parish church or some other place if the funeral takes place within nine days. During these Masses, Chinoys may offer incense to the deceased after the communion prayer and before the final blessing. In Masses after the wake, the picture of the deceased may continue to be displayed.

Incense may be offered at a square altar containing offerings of fruits, flowers, and wine. A picture of the deceased is displayed on this altar. Other food offerings may be included, but there should be no other burnt offerings (i.e. spirit money, model houses and vehicles, etc.). A banner with the Chinese character tian is displayed in front of this altar. The character means to offer libations or prayers for the dead at that particular altar.

The money donated by friends and relatives of the deceased is called abuloy in Filipino and tian gee in Hokkien Chinese. This money may be used for any expenses related to the death. If there are excess funds these are usually donated to charity. However, if the family is in financial need, there is nothing objectively wrong with keeping the money.

Mass Card

Religious congregations that have prayer associations can design Mass cards for the Chinoy Catholic community. The Society of Jesus, through the Philippine Jesuit Aid Association, has a Chinese mass card with the tian character mentioned above inscribed in front. Inside, there is a Chinese translation of the English text regarding the enrollment of the deceased in the prayer association. Such a Mass card integrates the Chinese and Catholic practices of offering prayers for the dead.

It is also a potentially effective way of introducing non-Christian Chinese to the Christian teaching regarding death. The Chinese Mass card is a simple way to be in solidarity with those who are mourning.

Funeral

In planning a Chinoy Catholic funeral, the family should meet with the Chinese funeral coordinator if an inculturated liturgy is desired. In this way the family members will know what to do from the funeral Mass to the burial.

During the funeral Mass at the church or the funeral parlor, incense may once again be offered after the communion prayer. After the Mass, the funeral procession begins. The spouse and children of the deceased “push” the hearse towards the burial site. Usually the burial site is far from the site of the funeral Mass so the procession begins after the Mass but after a few meters, the mourners board their own vehicles and there is a funeral convoy. At some point near the burial site, usually the gate of the cemetery if the burial site is not too far from the gate, the procession on foot is formed again.

At this point incense/joss sticks are distributed to the family of the deceased. These are offered to the deceased at the burial site. If a priest is present, more prayers are offered. After final viewing, the body is laid to rest. It is a custom in the Philippines that the mourners do not leave until the grave has been at least symbolically sealed.

Click [here](#) for a sample liturgy for a Funeral Mass.

Mourning

On the fortieth day after death, a special Mass is celebrated for the deceased, in remembrance of Jesus Christ’s ascension into heaven forty days after His resurrection. After the ascension, Jesus no longer appeared to His disciples. Some people believe that the dead also stop “wandering” after forty days. This explains the special prayers offered on the fortieth day after death.

The Chinese custom is to observe an immediate mourning period of 49 days, owing to the Buddhist belief that rebirth takes place after 49 days.

Filipino Catholics observe one year of mourning. The Chinese traditionally observe three years of mourning, but this is counted as 25 months in the lunar calendar and actually amounts to only two years in the Gregorian calendar.

Chinese Filipino Catholics who wish to combine Filipino and Chinese traditions may hold the “40th” day Mass on the 49th day instead. There is no need to be literal about counting the days between Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension. Another Mass may be held after the three years (actually two) of mourning. This is called sam tsai (三載 or 大祥) in Hokkien Chinese and babang luksa in Filipino. At this Mass family members usually wear red to show that they are no longer in mourning.

Wearing mourning clothes (black or white) or wearing a mourning pin for two years is, again, at the discretion of the family. White is the traditional Chinese color for mourning.

Ancestral Altar

If a death is experienced for the first time in a family, the family should decide whether or not to maintain an ancestral altar in the home. There are furniture makers who specialize in these kinds of altars, usually consisting of two pieces. One is rectangular and about five feet in height. The other is square and measures about four feet in height. The square table should fit under the rectangular table.

A portrait of the deceased (the one used in the wake) is hung on a wall and the altar is set up before it. Flowers and incense paraphernalia are placed on the tall rectangular altar. The smaller altar is pushed in during ordinary time and is pulled out during special days. Food offerings are placed on this smaller altar.