



Resource for Catholic Funerals: Planning a Catholic Funeral

This funeral planning guide is meant to be used in the following ways:

1. To plan the funeral of a loved one who has died, guided by the parish priest who will be celebrating the funeral.
2. To prepare for your own funeral at a pre-planning workshop led by your parish priest, so that informed choices can guide your family's planning for your funeral.

Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him. — 1 Cor. 2:9

The Three Rites of a Catholic Funeral

THE VIGIL (WAKE)

The vigil (also called “prayer service” or “wake”) is an occasion for family and friends to gather at the funeral home or a chapel to pray together, grieve together, and remember the life of our loved one. It often includes:

- A viewing of the body or casket when appropriate
- Scripture reading, singing, intercessory prayer
- Displays of memorabilia and flowers
- Eulogies or sharing of precious memories of the departed

THE FUNERAL LITURGY

The funeral liturgy normally takes the form of a Funeral Mass, which is held at the parish church. It is also possible to celebrate a “Funeral Liturgy Outside of Mass” in cases where the pastor and family deem it appropriate not to celebrate a Mass. The funeral liturgy is the place for the following:

- To give thanks and praise to God for Christ's victory over sin and death.
- To commend the deceased to God's tender mercy and compassion.
- To seek strength in the proclamation of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.
- To celebrate special ritual moments such as the procession of the casket, the placing of the pall, and the song of farewell, which help us to grieve with hope and support.



THE BURIAL (COMMITTAL)

The burial (also called the “committal”), takes place at the cemetery after the funeral liturgy. It may occur immediately after the funeral or at another time. The committal includes:

- Brief prayers, scripture reading, the Lord’s Prayer (“Our Father”), and a blessing of the remains.
- Military honors for veterans.
- Placing flowers or earth on the casket if desired.
- The casket may be lowered into the ground.
- Cremated remains are either buried or entombed in a mausoleum.

Traditional Burial or Cremation?

The Catholic Church has always preferred traditional burial over cremation, as it better expresses the reverence and beliefs we hold regarding the human body. Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. Please read the following to understand our beliefs about the human body and when and how cremation is allowed.

All quotations are from the "Order of Christian Funerals: Appendix on Cremation", NCCB, 1997.

WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT THE HUMAN BODY

As Catholics, we believe that the human person is made of a body and a soul, both of which are sacred. Our immortal soul is the invisible part of us which gives us life. Our mortal body is the visible part of us which communicates that life to all around us. We know each others' souls because of what our bodies show: smiles, caresses, acts of kindness, singing, dancing, etc. St. John Paul II explained this by saying, "The body reveals the person." Our reverence for the body is expressed in the Sacraments: the body is "washed in baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation, and fed with the Bread of Life" (n. 412). We believe that the body is so truly a part of "who we are" that the soul is not meant to be without it forever, and at the end of time our bodies will be reunited with our souls in the resurrection of the body.

WHY WE PREFER TRADITIONAL BURIAL

St. Paul and the earliest Christians often referred to Christians who had passed away as "those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:18). They believed that the bodies of the dead would one day be reunited with their souls in heaven, just as Christ's body was raised from



the dead and ascended into heaven. Traditional burial has always been a way that Christians placed the bodies of "those who have fallen asleep" to rest until they are raised again. Cremation, on the other hand, represented in non-Christian religions either the soul being freed from the body as from a prison, or the end of the individual's existence altogether. It is because of our deep reverence for the human body as a part of who we are, and our hope in the resurrection, that we prefer to "lay our brother/sister to rest" in traditional burial.

WHEN WE ALLOW CREMATION

Though the Church prefers traditional burial, she allows cremation when the following conditions are met:

- Whenever possible, the body should be present for the funeral. It can be subsequently cremated, either immediately following the funeral or at a later time.
- The remains must be stored in a worthy vessel (an urn which is made of solid material, beautiful, and dignified).
- The remains must be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium.
- The remains may not be scattered on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or kept in the home of a relative or friend. No part of the re-mains should be separated out from the whole (e.g. kept in a locket).
- Whenever possible, a memorial plaque or stone should mark the place where the remains are buried.

Planning the Funeral Liturgy

INTRODUCTORY RITES

The funeral liturgy usually begins in the back of the church. The family gathers with the priest around the casket. The following normally take place:

- The casket is sprinkled with holy water as a reminder of baptism.
- A pall is draped over the casket. The pall is a large white cloth which represents the white garment worn at baptism. It is not permissible to substitute a flag or quilt for the pall.
- During this rite, Christian symbols such as a Bible or cross may be placed on the casket. Other items (such as memorabilia) are best displayed at the vigil.
- The casket is borne or accompanied in procession to the front of the church by those chosen to be pall-bearers (generally six people).
- During the procession, an Entrance Chant is sung.



THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

The Liturgy of the Word is a time for God to speak his words of consolation to us through Sacred Scripture. In consultation with the family, the priest chooses the readings that will best speak to mourners. The following are the parts of the Liturgy of the Word:

- First Reading
- From Old Testament except in Easter Season
- Reader chosen with the priest
- Responsorial Psalm
- Must be a psalm chosen from the Lectionary
- Cannot be substituted with song or poem
- Usually sung by a cantor
- Second Reading
- From New Testament
- Reader chosen with the priest
- Gospel Acclamation
- Gospel Reading (read by priest or deacon)
- Homily (given by priest)
- Prayers of the Faithful (intercessions)

THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

The liturgy of the Eucharist is where we unite our sorrow and love with the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, made present in the Eucharist. Through Jesus truly present here on earth, we are united with our loved one in the closest way possible when we receive Holy Communion.

Below are the parts of the Liturgy of the Eucharist:

- Preparation of the gifts, during which an Offertory Chant or Hymn is sung. Two family members may be chosen as gift-bearers to bring up the bread and wine used for the consecration of Holy Eucharist.
- Eucharistic Prayers (An appropriate Mass setting may be sung for the acclamations.)
- Communion Rite, during which we receive the true Body and Blood of Jesus in Holy Communion. Non-Catholics and Catholics who have not been active in their Catholic faith do not receive Holy Communion out of reverence for its significance.
- To read more about the guidelines for Holy Communion, visit the USCCB site here: <https://bit.ly/1wSENaC>.
- The Communion Chant is begun while the priest is receiving, and may be followed by a hymn.



THE FINAL COMMENDATION

The final commendation brings closure to the funeral liturgy. It ends as the funeral began, with a procession of the casket, this time to our loved one's final resting place. It includes:

- Prayers for the deceased, led by the priest and offered by all in silence.
- Incensing of the casket by the priest as a sign of reverence.
- The song of farewell, sung by all.
- Prayer of Commendation, led by the priest.
- Procession of the casket out of the church, followed by the family and mourners. A recessional hymn is sung.

FUNERAL PLANNING SHEET

Name of Deceased: _____

Date of Death: _____

Funeral Date _____ Time: _____

Contact Person: _____

Contact Relationship: _____

Contact Phone(s): _____

Funeral Home: _____

Place of Funeral: Funeral Home Church Cemetery

PART 1: WAKE SERVICE

Date: _____ Time: _____

Place of Wake: Funeral Home Church

Eulogy will be offered: Yes No

If yes, list name: _____

A Wake Prayer Service is recommended to begin **prior** to the beginning of the visitation.



PART 2: FUNERAL AND/OR MEMORIAL SERVICE IN CHURCH

Opening Hymn: _____

First Reading (Old Testament): _____

Reader (*Please list name of reader*): _____

Responsorial Psalm (Sung by Cantor): _____

Second Reading (New Testament): _____

Reader (*Please list name of reader*): _____

Gospel Reading: _____

Words of Remembrance will be offered: Yes No (*Please discuss with the priest*)

If yes, list name: _____

FOR FUNERAL MASSES ONLY

Offertory Hymn: _____

Gift bearers: Yes No

If yes, list names: 1.) _____

2.) _____

Communion Hymn: _____

Ministers of Holy Communion: Yes No

(Please Note: Ministers of Holy Communion must be practicing Catholics who have received a letter of authorization for service from the Bishop.)

If yes, list names: 1.) _____

2.) _____

Closing Hymn: _____