

MUSIC FOR THE FUNERAL RITES

(Advisory Committee on Church Music)

The following advice is offered to help you in making arrangements for music to accompany the Funeral Rites of your loved one. The Funeral Book (Order of Christian Funerals – 1991) that we use outlines the role of music at this difficult time.

‘The music at funerals should support, console, and uplift the participants and should help to create in them a spirit of hope in Christ’s victory over death and in the Christian’s share in that victory’.

This is the challenge which musicians, celebrants and you the bereaved face in preparing to celebrate with dignity the Funeral Rites of a Christian. There is considerable scope for music at the two ceremonies which take place in the church – the Reception of the Body at the Church and the Funeral Mass.

A. RITE OF RECEPTION

Since the church is the place where the community of faith assembles for worship, the rite of reception of the body at the church has great significance.

Music is possible at the following points in this simple liturgy.

1. The **Entrance Song** accompanies the Procession from the door of the church and is complete when all are in place to continue with the liturgy. Participation in this may be helped by allowing, after the sprinkling of holy water, a large part of the congregation to get to their seats before the chief mourners, the coffin and the priest. If the singing is not possible instrumental music is played (organ, harp, guitar etc. depending on availability of musicians) which can continue during the placing of Christian symbols.
2. The **Responsorial Psalm** is sung after the First Reading and many settings of appropriate psalms are available. The psalm enables the community to respond in faith to the readings, to express its grief and to praise the God. The psalms are rich in imagery, feeling and symbolism. They powerfully express the suffering and pain, the hope and trust of people of every age and culture. Above all the psalms sing of faith in God, of revelation and redemption. Since the psalms are songs, whenever possible, they should be sung.
3. The **Litany or Prayer of Intercession** is spoken or sung after the homily. The Litany used has a ‘Lord have mercy’ response. This will be enhanced if sung, using, for example, one of the Penitential Rite settings with which you, and your congregations, are familiar.

A Hymn to Our Lady might be appropriate during the Concluding Rite according to local custom. The use of instrumental music as people offer sympathies is always appreciated and contributes to the warmth of the ceremony. The music at this

celebration can be effectively led by a Cantor or Soloist with the support of an instrumentalist. Your Parish may have this kind of structure in place so that you can make choices from the available repertoire of the parish community without too much difficulty.

B. THE FUNERAL MASS

The choice of music, either vocal or instrumental, at a funeral mass follows the usual guidelines for any Eucharistic celebration.

Eucharistic Prayer Acclamations

Given that Eucharistic Prayer is the main prayer of the Mass, it is important that everyone is encouraged to participate in the singing. Three acclamations are traditionally sung during this prayer: the Holy, Holy, (Sanctus), the memorial acclamation (e.g. When we eat this bread) and the Great Amen. Choose a setting which is well known or which can be sung easily by everyone. It may be helpful to have a Cantor/Soloist to lead the congregation.

Liturgy of the Word

The singing of the Responsorial Psalm is an important element in the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word. It is important not to substitute other songs in place of the psalm at this time in the liturgy.

Some people feel that singing a Gospel Acclamation is out of keeping with the spirit of a funeral liturgy. On the contrary the Alleluia is a powerful reminder of Easter joy in the resurrection which is the source of our hope at this time.

Songs and Hymns

When choosing songs/hymns for the Funeral Mass, it is important that the congregation are able to participate as much as possible. The Entrance and Communion Songs are particularly significant. Since music can evoke strong feelings, it should be chosen with great sensitivity. If you are thinking of including a piece of non-religious music, it is important that it is in harmony with our faith in the Lord's death and resurrection and will contribute to the atmosphere of Christian worship. Secular music should not replace the sacred music which is part of the rite. Other songs are often suggested for a funeral Mass which would be more suited to the wake in the home when favourite songs can be sung in the right setting. Once again the Funeral Book offers us advice in the matter of texts and choices.

‘Music is integral to the funeral rites. It allows the community to express convictions and feelings that words alone may fail to convey. It has the power to console and uplift mourners and to strengthen the unity of the assembly in faith and love. The texts of the songs chosen for a particular celebration should express the paschal mystery of the Lord’s suffering, death, and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture’.

C. FINAL COMMENDATION AND FAREWELL

The **Song of Farewell** is usually sung as the coffin is incensed and sprinkled with water. The Order of Christian Funerals contains a straightforward music setting of the refrain and verses ‘Receive his soul and present him to God the Most High’.

The **Processional Song** – ‘May the angels lead you into paradise’ – offers words of hope to everyone who gathers for the funeral rites. Some examples are given in the Rite. There are several settings of this song, including Songs of the Angels and other suitable pieces like An tAiséirí.

When Christians die, the Church intercedes on their behalf, confident that ‘life is unchanged, but not ended’. During the funeral rites, the Church on earth unites with the Church in heaven to offer worship, praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of life which has now been returned to God, the author of life. The ceremonies also bring hope and consolation to the living.

We hope that this document will help you as you grieve and that you will be assisted in your preparations by musicians who are committed to their role as ministers of consolation and hope.

