

CELEBRATING A CATHOLIC FUNERAL – Irish Episcopal Commission for Liturgy

Lord for those who believe in your love death is not the end

The death of a Christian is not the end of life, but rather a transformation in an onward journey towards eternal life with God. We believe that this call to eternal life begins for all Christians in the waters of baptism. Nevertheless for those family and friends who are bereaved there is sadness in parting, and death when it comes, even when it has been expected, such as after a long illness, always leaves a sense of loss and shock. The Catholic Church has over many centuries developed a rich tradition in its liturgy for funerals. This liturgy seeks to balance the need to console those who are mourning with the hope in the person of Christ who is 'our life and our resurrection'. The Catholic funeral rites commend the deceased to the mercy of God, and as we give thanks to God for the life of a Christian we pray that God may forgive whatever sins the deceased may have committed through human weakness.

By a series of services *the Order of Christian Funerals* – the book we use at funerals – provides a means by which the local church community may support the personal grief of a family, from the time of the death of a loved one to the final committal at the graveside, by a series of services. Some of these prayers are celebrated in the intimacy of the home, while others are intended as public worship in a church. The funeral rites thus present a balance between sharing with the personal grief of the family and the celebration of the public liturgy of the Church.

The ties of friendship and affection do not unravel with death

In Ireland there is a strong tradition of 'the wake' which presents an occasion when friends of the bereaved family can extend consolation and sympathy. This time offers an opportunity when personal reminiscences of the deceased can be shared on a more intimate level, and the interests and associations that the deceased shared in his or her life with others can be recalled. During this time it is important that the priest who will preside at the funeral meets with the family and prepares with them the liturgy of the Funeral Mass.

The Vigil for the deceased is envisaged as the principal rite celebrated by the Christian community in the time following death and before the funeral liturgy. The Vigil is centered on a liturgy of the Word. This will include prayers and may also provide an opportunity for a member of the family to speak in remembrance of the deceased.

The Reception of the Body in the Church signifies the transition from the expression of the personal grief of the family in the home to the public expression of the local parish community in the liturgy. It is also the first step of returning to God the person that has been loved.

This service of reception often takes place on the eve of the Funeral Mass, thus providing the possibility for mourners to be present with the family at this time who will be unable to be with them at the Funeral Mass.

In baptism they died in Christ

The prayers and symbols used at this reception recall the dignity of each Christian given to them by their baptism. The coffin is sprinkled with Holy Water as a remembrance that in the waters of baptism Christians receive the pledge of eternal life. The coffin is covered with a funeral pall to recall that on the day of their baptism a Christian is wrapped in a white robe as a child of God. The coffin is placed before the Paschal candle, symbolizing Christ's undying presence, and his victory over death by his resurrection. Other Christian symbols such as a Cross or the Book of Gospels may also be placed on the coffin at this time. These symbols are clear signs of dignity of the baptized Christian.

The family may also wish to carry them other emblems, which reflect the deceased's interests or personality. These should be treated with respect on the understanding that they do not conflict with the Christian symbols that are used in the ceremony. A place should be provided for them either near the coffin or the family, but they should not displace the Christian symbols representing the baptismal calling of the deceased. In many parishes in Ireland the use of the pall has become the norm and this should be respected. Reasons of social distinction do not justify its omission.

Eternal rest grant to them, O Lord

The Funeral Mass is the central liturgical celebration for the deceased. The prayers of this Mass commend the deceased to the mercy of God and offer consolation and hope to the bereaved. As the Mass is the central act of the Church's liturgy it is an act of worship of God by the Church, therefore the text of the Roman Missal should be used.

The Word of the Lord

A variety of suitable readings are offered from both the Old and New Testaments for the Funeral Mass. It is essential that these readings should be read clearly and with sensitivity. A member of the family or family friend may undertake these readings, however, particularly if they are not regular readers at Mass, if required, a parish reader should be available to undertake this ministry. The readings are taken from the sacred scriptures and may not be replaced by secular readings. Reflections taken from Christian literature may be used if required at a later stage in the Funeral Mass. However, some poems are better kept to the less formal stages of the funeral rites, either in the home or at the graveside.

The homily is given by the priest and should be prepared in consultation with the family of the deceased. The homily is based on the scriptures and the life of the departed in that he or she tried to live out the virtues of being a Christian. The homilist by his words is also especially called to seek to bring comfort and consolation to those bereaved. It is not to be a eulogy, which as a form of an address focuses on the deceased and the achievements of the deceased.

The prayer of the faithful, general intercessions, call upon God to bring comfort to those who mourn and to show mercy to the deceased. Members of the family or friends of the deceased may also wish to participate in these prayers. If the families compose them, clear guidelines on the format should be given.

Lord, receive the gifts we offer to win peace and rest ...

The gifts to be presented for the Eucharist are traditionally the bread and wine. It is recommended that members of the family of the deceased bring these to the altar. It is not appropriate at this stage of the Mass to bring up symbols of the deceased's past life. To do so is a confusion of the presentation of the bread and wine, which become the Eucharist for us. Furthermore 'gifts' are 'given' not merely a 'symbol' or gesture and they are taken back at the end of the Mass. If it is desired that suitable symbols associated with the interests or work of the deceased be part of the funeral rites then they should be carried into the church with the reception of the remains.

The life and death of each of us has an influence on others

There are occasions when a member of the family may choose to speak to the mourners. When and how this is done can vary according to local custom, and the local practice of a diocese or parish should be respected. The funeral rites offer a variety of stages from home to church to graveside. Some personal sentiments are more appropriately spoken in the intimacy of the family home or funeral home. Other words in the form of an oration would be better suited to the traditional location of the graveside.

The reception of the remains also provides an opportunity for a member of the family to offer a few words of remembrance of the deceased and acknowledgement to those who have supported the grief of the family. It should be borne in mind that the Funeral Mass is primarily an act of praise of God; it would therefore go against the spirit of the liturgy if it is perceived that a person's social status can directly influence the celebration of the liturgy. Nor would it be appropriate to use the opportunity to insert into the celebration of the liturgy contradictory sentiments that reflect a merely secular approach to the mystery of death. If it is the local custom that a member of the family generally does speak during the funeral rites in the church then certain conventions should be respected. Only one family member should speak. It should be undertaken with the agreement of the celebrant and the prepared text should be discussed with the celebrant at a suitable time before the morning of the funeral. A separate microphone should be used, rather than the ambo which is reserved for the Word of God. The Funeral Mass in the Church is neither the appropriate occasion nor the place to insert a speech or eulogy. If there is a lack of clarity as to what is admissible, each diocese will have guidelines, which will attempt to offer a balance, which will respect the reverence due to the celebration of the Eucharist, and also be sensitive to the feelings of those who mourn.

Sing with all the saints in glory

Music offers the community a way of expressing convictions and feelings that words alone may fail to convey. Music has the capacity to uplift those who are mourning and strengthens the assembly in faith and love and create a spirit of hope. Music chosen for the Funeral Mass should primarily be in praise and thanksgiving to God. Non-liturgical music should not normally be used during the Funeral Mass; if for a particular reason it is, then it should be chosen with great care and should not contradict religious sentiments. The use of taped music during the celebration of Mass is to be strongly discouraged as it is an intrusion into the celebration of a living worshipping community. As with other aspects of the funeral rites what may be considered fitting in the intimacy of a home may come across as banal in the context of the public liturgy of the Church.

***for we believe that Jesus died and rose again
and that it will be the same for those who have died with Jesus***

The very centre of the Christian funeral rites is the death and resurrection of Christ. These rites are a faith expression and experience. Death is seen in that faith perspective. When people ask for a funeral Mass to be celebrated they are expressing that faith message. In the funeral rites of a Christian we pray that divine life given to us in baptism may be brought to its fulfillment in eternal glory. In celebrating a funeral we strive to bring consolation and hope to the bereaved and pray that the dead may obtain God's mercy and have eternal rest and peace.

