

WHEN SOMEONE YOU LOVE HAS DIED: PREPARING FOR A FUNERAL

Fr Columba McCann O.S.B. takes us through organising the honouring of a deceased Roman Catholic through the Funeral liturgies of the Church.

The trauma of losing someone close is very deep and leaves us disorientated. Depending on the circumstances, the death of a loved one can leave us feeling numb, shocked, exhausted, angry, relieved, depressed, or a combination of any of these. Trying to organise a funeral in the middle of all this is not easy. Thankfully there are people around to help: your local priest, your local undertaker, a parish Funeral Ministry Team, friends and neighbours. Priests, Funeral Ministry Teams and undertakers have long experience of helping people when a death occurs and will give you the advice and support that you need.

What follows is intended as a brief guide to help you choose what is best for the funeral of a loved one. First, there is a brief description of the principal rites at the time of a funeral, and then some general advice about planning.

Remembering the Dead: the Wake or Vigil

Funerals are a time for remembering. We can feel an urge to tell the story of the one who has passed away. Stories about the good times and the bad surface and want to be told. We reminisce. This is something natural and healthy and deserves a bit of time and space. The Irish tradition of the wake has allowed for this, but this custom hasn't survived everywhere.

A rite called the '**Vigil for the Deceased**' has been put together for use in Ireland. It is not well known but it offers an opportunity for family and friends to gather for prayer in the presence of the body of the person who has died. This could take place at home, in a funeral home or in the hospital or nursing home mortuary chapel. It includes readings and prayers that evoke our hope in the resurrection as well as giving voice to the pain of what has happened. It is a moment of entrusting ourselves and our loved one who has died to the care of Christ himself. Sometimes, if people wish, it could include the rosary or a portion of it. All the prayers can be led by a lay person or a religious or priest. At the end of the prayers people might want to voice some personal remembrances of the person who has died, perhaps to read a poem or any other text that was dear to the deceased, tell some stories or to hear some favourite music. This kind of remembrance takes place more easily and naturally at a small gathering such as this than at the funeral Mass, which tends to be more public and formal.

If you would like to use some of the material from the Vigil for the Deceased, ask your local Funeral Ministry Team or priest. You may be the first person in the parish to request it!

The Reception of the Remains

An important moment in the Funeral celebration is when the body of the person who has died is received or welcomed back into their parish church where they worshipped with the rest of the Christian community. It is a kind of homecoming. Relatives, friends and other members of the community gather either inside or outside the church. When the chief mourners arrive with the coffin at the door of the church, they are greeted by the priest or lay minister who conducts the service. The coffin is sprinkled with holy water as a reminder of Baptism: the person who has died was already united at Baptism with the death of Christ in order that he or she would rise again to new life.

The Pall

If the deceased was a member of a particular association or group, the coffin may have had a flag or other insignia on it when it was being brought to the church; these are normally now removed – we are all one in Baptism and thus no individual is singled out by special insignia on the coffin once it is inside the church. There are however special signs of honour associated with being a Christian that you may wish to be placed on the coffin. The first of these is the pall. This is a large white cloth which is draped over the coffin. It recalls the white garment (sometimes called the Christening shawl) worn by each newly baptised person as a sign of their Christian dignity. It can be placed on the coffin by family, friends, or another member of the community. Every parish should have a pall, but many don't, so you may need to check this in advance.

Christian Symbols

The coffin is then led in procession to the sanctuary of the church. When everyone has taken their place you may wish to have the Christian life of your loved one further honoured by having Christian symbols placed on the coffin. Examples of these would be a cross, a Bible, rosary beads or a prayer book. This introductory part of the service concludes with a short prayer. All then sit of the Liturgy of the Word.

The Liturgy of the Word

The Liturgy of the Word is the central part of this service and is composed mainly of readings from the Bible. Although the books of the Bible are many centuries old and not always easy to understand, we believe that they are inspired by God and that God can really speak to us through these ancient texts. Above all, these writings help us to know Christ himself, who passed through death into new life. At a critical moment like this, when all our certainties seem to fall away, we can derive great inner strength when he hear the story and message of Jesus himself, who triumphed over death. If you wish, the Parish Funeral Team or priest will help you choose readings which seem particularly suitable to your situation.

Who Should Read the Readings?

If you really want people to hear the message of the readings which you have chosen, you need to have someone who is experienced at reading in public. Inexperienced readers sometimes think they can be clearly heard and understood, but, because they have no training, much of what they read is lost. It is best to pick someone who already reads at Mass, a friend, relative or, better still, one of the regular parish readers (the priest or Funeral Team should be able to track one down for you). One piece of advice: a person who was very close to the one who has died may be put under quite a strain, trying to read in public, so close family may not be the best candidates. They need support and care rather than additional burdens. If you want to involve family members and other chief mourners in a prominent way in the liturgy, choose other ways instead of reading. You will see a number of examples later on. After the readings are concluded and the priest explains them briefly, everybody stands to pray together for the person who has died and for those who mourn and are in pain. Together everyone prays the Our Father. If you wish, a decade of the Rosary might be recited before the rite concludes.

Extending Sympathies to the Mourners

At the end of the Reception of the Body (if it takes place the evening before the Funeral Mass), the family or chief mourners normally remain in the church so that people may greet them briefly and sympathise. This might be in the front seat of the church, where the family was for the service, or in some other part of the church building. If you wished, you could set up some souvenirs or mementos of the person who died on a table nearby for people to see as they file past. The best place for this would be somewhere discreet to the side.

The 'Reception of Body' described here normally takes place in the evening, with the coffin remaining in the church overnight. The funeral Mass then takes place the following day. It is also possible for the remains of your loved one to be received into the church at the beginning of (or shortly before) Mass, rather than being in the church overnight.



The Funeral Mass

The Funeral Mass is normally the principal element of the whole funeral. The greatest gift we can give a person is to remember them at Mass and to unite our prayers for them with the self-offering of Jesus which is at the heart of the Mass. Perhaps it should also be said that Mass is not always the ideal service for everyone. If, for example, the Mass had no real significance for the person who has died or for the chief mourners, then it could be very artificial for them to go through a ceremony that means little for them. Asking for a funeral Mass is not just a matter of using the church building for an hour or so, but of asking to be part of the Christian community as it gathers to worship Jesus Christ. The principal focus in the funeral Mass will be on Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection are solemnly commemorated and made present under the signs of bread and wine. If this is not the focus you want for your loved one's funeral, then you might talk to your priest about arranging a different kind of service. The Mass is there as a wonderful help to you and your loved one who has died. At Mass the Christian community will pray for you, that you will receive the strength and the care you need to live through your grief. The Christian community which gathers for Mass will also be very honest: they won't 'canonise' your loved one, but will give thanks to God for them and pray that God will forgive them their sins. Most importantly, the whole liturgy proclaims Jesus Christ who was crucified, died and rose from the dead and prays that each one of us, in our own way, will share in his triumph over death.

The Word of God

The Word of God, proclaimed in the Scripture readings is, just as in the Reception of the Remains, a fundamental element of the Mass. Through these readings from Scripture we hear the voice of Christ himself. He has a message of love and hope for us most especially in the bleak experience of death. Because of the importance of the Scriptures, we don't have any other readings at this point of the Mass. You may have other prayers or texts that you think are very relevant to the death of your loved one.



Don't include them among the scripture readings. Instead you might ask the Parish Funeral Team or priest to use them when he preaches, or you might consider reading them at the end of Mass. Other possible times are at the end of the Reception of the Remains, or at the Vigil, as described above.

Who should read? As at the Reception of the Remains, pick an experienced reader who was not too close to the person who died. Getting up to read is difficult enough without having to worry about whether you are going to break down and cry.

What readings should be picked? Again, the Parish Funeral team or priest will give you all the help you want here.

The Liturgy of the Word finishes with the Prayer of the Faithful: together the whole gathering of people prays for the needs of the whole Church and for people throughout the world. At a Funeral Mass, this will of course include special prayers for the person who has died and all those who mourn their passing. Sometimes the prayer intentions are read by the priest, but there is the (preferable) option of having a lay reader read them. Again, it is a good idea to have a reader who is experienced and who will not be put under strain at this moment.

The Preparation of Gifts

The gifts of bread and wine are carried forward and presented to the priest. This is an ideal moment to involve family members or others among the chief mourners – it is a significant action in the Mass, and yet easily performed. You could also include among these gifts some kind of donation to a charity or worthy cause which was dear to the person who has died. The emphasis at this moment in the Mass is the giving of bread and wine and other donations; it is not really the time for carrying other mementos or keepsakes of the person who has died. If you want to symbolise their life through various objects, it is better to put them on display somewhere in the church, as outlined in the section Reception of the Remains.

Sharing in the Eucharist

The true heart of the funeral Mass is our sharing in the Eucharist. We do this by entering into the great prayer of the Mass, the Eucharistic Prayer. The priest recites this prayer, but he does so in the name of everyone present. We join in by praying silently but also by singing or saying out loud the various acclamations that are part of the prayer: the Holy, Holy; the Memorial Acclamation; the Great Amen. The other great moment is the sharing in Holy Communion. Those who are prevented from receiving (for example, non-Catholics) might present themselves and ask the priest for a blessing instead.



The Final Commendation

The Mass concludes with a solemn and moving ritual through which we commend our loved one to God's love. Before we go our separate ways, we pray for the person who has died and honour their remains with special signs: we sprinkle the coffin with blessed water, as a reminder of Baptism, and we use incense as a sign of honour to their body, which was a temple of the Holy Spirit. When this rite has been completed, we all process together through the church and eventually make our way to the place of burial or cremation.

The Burial or Cremation

This moment is called the 'committal', when we finally commit the body of our loved one to the dust from which it was made, either by burial or cremation. It can be a harrowing, but important, moment, and should not be rushed over. We need to take time with this moment of 'goodbye', and even linger for a while. When a person is buried, the priest normally sprinkles some earth on the coffin. It might be a good idea for each of the chief mourners also to do the same, perhaps at the end of the ceremony. Some communities have the custom of the family members throwing some clay onto the coffin. Another gesture of farewell is possible at a cremation, for example, sprinkling the coffin with Holy Water. The short readings and prayers which accompany this solemn moment of the funeral will strengthen all who are present.

Some General Points

The following points may help summarise what is needed:

- This first thing is not to worry about the arrangements. All the material above may seem rather detailed, but in practice the priest and undertaker will guide you through it. Don't feel you have to do everything. The priest and other ministers are there to look after you.
- After a death has occurred people sometimes feel under pressure to have the Mass and burial as soon as possible. If possible, avoid the temptation to rush things.
- You may wish to involve family members or other chief mourners in the celebrations in a special way. Give them some of the simpler tasks: placing of Christian symbols at the reception of remains, bringing up the gifts at Mass, sprinkling earth on the coffin at the cemetery. You can also involve a lot of people in a more informal way by gathering for prayer (Vigil for the Deceased) and reflection at the funeral home or at home. This is an ideal time for favourite songs, prayers, poems and stories.
- The reading of any texts in the church itself is more demanding, and is best given to someone who will not be too distraught, preferably an experienced church reader.
- Music can add greatly to the meaningful celebration of a funeral. In the church itself, use only religious music that has been written for the liturgy. Your local priest will be able to contact those who have the ministry of music in the parish. Some parishes have congregational singing at the funeral Mass, which is the best way to have it. Ask if this is feasible.

- You might find it helpful to have other significant moments in the weeks and months ahead when you remember your loved one in a special way: a month's mind Mass(visits to the cemetery(the annual parish Mass for the dead in November(putting up a tombstone(and the first anniversary. These could be moments when you gather with just a few people to pray

