

# Funerals



**Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord.  
And let perpetual light shine upon  
him.**

**May he rest in peace. Amen.  
May his soul and the souls of all the  
faithful departed, through the  
mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.**

*(Order of Christian Funerals)*



Nothing can take away the pain we feel when confronting death, but immense comfort can be drawn from the Catholic funeral liturgy and its accompanying traditions. Catholic funeral rites incorporate Scripture, ritual, and symbol to help express beliefs about life, death, and the afterlife, and how they are entwined.

In the Catholic funeral tradition we not only comfort the bereaved, but we pray as well for the deceased. The Catholic Church teaches, "Though separated from the living, the dead are still at one with the community of believers on earth and benefit from their prayers and intercessions" (*Order of Christian Funerals*, no. 6).

## When a death occurs, what is done first?

When a loved one dies, it is a time of great stress and emotion. It may be difficult to make decisions or know what to do, especially if the death is sudden. Making a phone call to the parish, or asking a close friend or medical staff member to make that call, is an

important first step. A priest, deacon, or lay bereavement minister can offer not only spiritual support, but also practical guidance about what steps need to be taken next.

Typical initial responsibilities of the immediate family include:

➤ **Praying.** After the death of a loved one, family members often join with a priest to pray the Psalms and Scripture passages from the Office of the Dead in the *Liturgy of Hours* (the Church's official daily prayer), as an intercession for the one who has just died. When the death occurs in a hospital, especially a large one, the hospital chaplain may offer to lead these prayers.



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➤ **Making decisions regarding organ donation.** Organ donation is consistent with Church teaching on charity, as long as the body is handled respectfully (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2296). In many places, medical personnel may routinely ask the survivors for permission to use healthy organs. If possible, it is best to know in advance how to respond and abide by the wishes of the deceased.

➤ **Notifying immediate family members who are not already present.** Even before funeral arrangements are confirmed, someone should telephone those most closely affected by the death. Follow-up calls with details can be done later, either personally or through a trusted friend or relative.

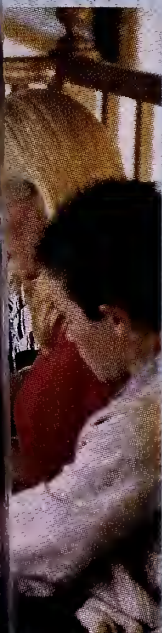
➤ **Contacting a funeral director.** The priest or church office can suggest a reputable funeral home, if the family does not already have a strong preference. Usually, the funeral home staff will pick up the body from the place of death and take it to their facility. If the death has occurred far from where the funeral will be held, a local funeral director can be invaluable in assessing the options and arranging to transport the body or remains.

## How is the funeral ceremony planned?

Family members can expect to play an active role both in planning and participating in the funeral, with the priest or his representative guiding them through the necessary steps. A “standard” Catholic funeral, as outlined in the *Order of Christian Funerals*, actually consists of three separate ceremonies: the Vigil Service, the Funeral Liturgy, and the Rite of Committal, with the Funeral Liturgy being the main liturgical service.

### Decisions typically include:

➤ **Choosing a Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy.** A priest can conduct the funeral liturgy either in the context of a Mass or outside of Mass, depending on family preference and the relationship of the deceased







to the Church. If many of the mourners are non-Catholic, the family may choose to have a funeral liturgy without a Mass to help them feel more comfortable with the service, and to avoid any potential misunderstandings about Catholic Communion restrictions.

► ***Finalizing the location.***

A Funeral Mass is customarily held in the parish church of the deceased or his/her family. The liturgy outside of a Mass may be conducted either at the funeral home or at the church.

► ***Selecting Scripture readings and hymns.*** Ceremony planners are often given a planning booklet to help choose among various options. While this liturgical planning may at times seem like an added burden to some survivors, such personalized touches can greatly enhance the beauty of the funeral ceremony, and give added comfort to those in attendance.

► ***Inviting specific friends or relatives to serve as lectors, gift bearers, and Eucharistic ministers.*** Some close survivors may feel too overcome by grief to be able to read clearly or assist with the service. In that case, someone who is a bit less emotionally involved may be asked instead. If no friends or family are able to assume these roles, other members of the parish may be contacted.

► ***Asking someone to offer a remembrance speech.*** Though this is optional and specific guidelines vary, the family may elect to have a representative speak briefly at the vigil service about the life of the deceased.



➤ **Selecting pallbearers.** At larger funerals, some mourners (usually six to ten) may be invited to carry the casket in and out of church. Non-Catholics as well as Catholics may be pallbearers at a Catholic funeral.



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## What About Related Ceremonies?

There are several variations and possible combinations of rites outlined in the *Order of Christian Funerals*. In addition, regional and ethnic customs exert additional influences. In general, Catholic funeral traditions usually include:

➤ **The wake or visitation.** Though not mandated by Catholic custom or theology, contemporary American bereavement practices often involve calling hours at a funeral home for one or two days prior to the funeral. This allows friends and extended family members to offer condolences to the immediate family. Some families prefer instead to receive visitors at their home, or arrange for calling hours at the church.

➤ **The vigil service.** Prior to 1989, when the new *Order of Christian Funerals* was issued, families simply gathered the evening before a funeral and recited the Rosary together. That custom is still carried on today. Recognizing that non-Catholics may feel uncomfortable with the Rosary, a Scripture-based vigil service, either at the funeral home or church can be arranged. Personalized touches and informalities which would not be considered appropriate at a Funeral Mass can sometimes be included in the less formal vigil service.



➤ **The committal ceremony.** This brief prayer service may be celebrated at the grave, tomb, or crematorium, or even at sea. There are several variations of this rite, depending on whether it immediately follows the funeral or is celebrated independently of the funeral.

➤ **The funeral meal.** Friends and family rarely just disperse from the cemetery or church, but gather together following the services to share memories and enjoy a meal together. This may be at a restaurant, at the parish hall, at the home of the deceased, or at some other convenient location. Sometimes the atmosphere at the funeral dinner may become quite jovial, as family and friends celebrate life eternal in the midst of death.

## How can friends and family be best supported in their time of grief?

➤ **Make every effort to attend the visitation or service.** Mourners really do draw comfort from the presence of others and recognize their attendance as a gift, even if they are awkward or say little or nothing. As a busy widow says, "Now, when someone dies and the question comes to mind, 'I wonder if I should try to go?' I answer 'yes,' because I know how much it meant to me."

➤ **Never try to minimize someone's loss.** Our society does not like to confront death and its pain, so it's not unusual to hear condolence remarks that attempt to gloss over the reality. Comments to mourners such as, "Doesn't it seem as if







he/she is just sleeping?" or "He/she looks almost alive," should be considered inappropriate. Rather, a simple but heartfelt "I'm sorry for your loss," or "You have my sympathy," are much more effective.

➤ **Arrange for a Mass to be said for the soul of the deceased.**

Catholics can easily arrange this through their own parish, or through any Catholic priest. In addition, certain religious orders routinely offer Masses for the deceased, usually providing a card with which to notify the family and a Mass request form to fill out and return.

➤ **Send flowers.** Although this seems to be an increasingly expensive gesture, it is still a timeless condolence courtesy. A bouquet or live plant may be sent to the home of the bereaved or to the funeral home immediately upon learning of the death, unless of course, the family specifies "no flowers." Flowers may also be delivered several weeks after the funeral, when family members may be feeling particularly lonely.

➤ **Take food.** In many communities, taking food to the home of the bereaved for the relatives who may gather there is another time-honored custom. Sometimes this is an organized gesture; other times friends drop over individually with items that can easily be served and shared.

➤ **Offer physical assistance.** Offering to meet out-of-town visitors at the airport, care for young children, or tidy a home before guests arrive might help to reduce some of the stress and chaos typically associated with a death in the family. With any offers of assistance, however, the family's privacy must be respected, and their right to accept or reject any offers of assistance.

➤ **Send a memorial donation.** This donation should be in keeping with the wishes of the



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deceased and/or the family. If no memorials are specified, a personal check sent to the family may be appreciated. This may be used to defray travel or funeral expenses, or added to a memorial gift of the family's choosing.

► **Keep in touch after the funeral.** Family and friends should continue to remember the grieving both in prayer and in deed. Sometimes a short note, telephone call, or visit several weeks after the funeral means as much or more to the survivors as those that are sent immediately.

► **Continue prayers.** Pray for the deceased and pray for those who are mourning. One of the Spiritual Works of Mercy is to pray for the living and the dead. Another is to "comfort the sorrowful." Prayerful support is a tremendous blessing to all.

## Where to go for more information

*Order of Christian Funerals (The Rites of the Catholic Church, The Liturgical Press)*

### From Our Sunday Visitor

*Catholic Etiquette: What You Need to Know About Catholic Rites and Wrongs* by Kay Lynn Isca  
*Daily Roman Missal*

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