

A Catholic Understanding of Funerals (part 1 of 3)

Fr. Bobbin

At the heart of our faith is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which frees us from sin and death. For those baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus, death is not the end. At the moment of death, the soul lives on in union with God in the perfect happiness of heaven, in the state of final purification known as purgatory, or in the eternal separation from God known as hell. Furthermore, we believe in and look forward to the resurrection of the body at the end of the world. Our resurrected bodies will be reunited with our souls in heaven or hell.

Catholic funerals express our faith in Jesus' resurrection and hope for our own resurrection. There are basically two purposes for a Catholic funeral: 1) to pray for the salvation of the deceased person, and 2) to help lead the person's loved ones from grief to a deeper faith in the resurrection. Unfortunately, there are a couple trends today that show a need for greater understanding of these purposes.

First of all, it seems that many of us need to be reminded that the primary purpose of a funeral is to pray for our deceased loved one. Today it is popular to refer to the funeral as a "celebration of life." But this term is misleading. It is true that a funeral is a time for thanking God for the gift of the person's life and all the blessings God gave to that person in his or her life. However, this is not the main focus of the funeral. Once again, the main purpose is to pray for the person, to intercede for his or her salvation. We all have a tendency to speak of our deceased loved ones as if they are already in heaven. But, as much as we love someone, and as wonderful a person as we know them to be, the reality is: *we cannot know for certain that someone is already in heaven.* (Except for saints officially canonized by the Church after a long process of investigation.) It is an act of love and faith to *pray for the person* that God quickly welcomes him or her into heaven.

The best way to pray for a person who has died is to offer Mass for that person. The celebration of the Eucharist is at the center of our Catholic faith. We have had a long tradition of offering Mass for people who have died. When we offer Mass for someone (living or deceased) we are asking God that the benefits of Jesus' saving death and resurrection be applied to the person for his or her salvation. Thus, the celebration of a "Mass of Christian Burial" is at the heart of a Catholic funeral.

But, there is more to Catholic funerals. When someone passes away, we are invited to observe the "Order of Christian Funerals," a series of steps that not only serve the purpose of praying for the deceased but also serve the second purpose of a Catholic funeral: helping loved ones to gradually deal with the pain of loss and come to a deeper faith in the resurrection, which is a source of great peace. The Order of Christian Funerals includes: prayers at the time of death, a vigil for the deceased (gathering in the presence of the body for a period of time, during which a priest or deacon may lead a brief prayer service), prayers at the conclusion of the vigil as the funeral is about to move to the church, the Mass of Christian Burial in the church, and the Rite of Committal at the place of burial. All of these steps are meaningful on a spiritual level. Even on a purely human, psychological level, they can help people grieve for their loved one and experience a sense of closure.

Unfortunately, however, there seems to be another unhealthy trend today. Many people cut the funeral process short by eliminating important steps. Many people do not wish to have a funeral Mass for their deceased loved one. (Very frequently the family of the deceased does not practice the faith and so is not comfortable with Mass.) But, to omit the funeral Mass is to leave out the heart of the entire process. Sometimes, a Mass is celebrated for a deceased person but no vigil is held. This, too, is less than ideal because it takes away opportunities for the family to confront their loss and move toward a greater peace. There may be good, valid reasons to omit some part of the Order of Christian Funerals, but we must understand the purpose of the entire Catholic funeral process and plan the arrangements with careful decision. Devout, practicing Catholics should make their wishes known to their family, especially if the family is not practicing or is of different faiths.

A Catholic Understanding of Funerals (part 2 of 3)

How do I make arrangements with the church when a family member has died?

Usually, all arrangements are made through a funeral director. It is his or her job to handle all the details of the funeral. It helps everything go smoothly if the funeral director alone works with the church. If there will be a Mass of Christian Burial, St. Ignatius' funeral coordinator will be in touch with the family to plan the details.

What is different about a funeral Mass?

Because our Baptism unites us to the death and resurrection of Jesus, the act of salvation, the signs and symbols of a Catholic funeral are the same as those of Baptism. At the beginning of the Mass, the priest meets the casket and family at the church door (if feasible) just as, in many churches, the celebration of Baptism begins at the church door as a sign that Baptism is our entryway into the Church. The priest sprinkles the casket with holy water, recalling the water of Baptism, and then the family (or funeral directors) cover the casket with a pall, a white cloth that recalls the "white garment" worn in the Baptismal ceremony. The Paschal candle, the symbol of the risen Jesus, is placed near the casket during the Mass, just as a person's Baptismal candle is lit from the Paschal candle during the Baptismal ceremony, since our Baptism unites us to Jesus' death and resurrection.

After this introduction the Mass, for the most part, continues as usual. At the conclusion of Mass, the final blessing is omitted and the priest leads the prayers known as the "final commendation." During these prayers, he incenses the casket as a sign of reverence for the human body, which becomes a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit, the very divine life of God, through Baptism.

Should a funeral Mass be celebrated even if most of the deceased's family is non-Catholic or non-practicing?

In this case, the family members must use their judgment. We must keep a few things in mind. If the deceased person was a practicing Catholic and would have wanted a funeral Mass, it is good to honor his or her wishes. The purpose of a funeral Mass is to pray for the deceased; the Mass is efficacious no matter how many or how few people attend, or whether or not they are Catholic, or practice their faith. If many non-Catholics or non-practicing Catholics are present at the funeral, the priest and funeral directors are usually sensitive to this and will direct people when to stand, sit, kneel, etc. during the Mass. Priests will usually offer a gentle reminder that we can only invite practicing Catholics to come forward to receive Communion. Non-Catholics and non-practicing Catholics need not feel uncomfortable during the Mass. Experiencing a Catholic funeral Mass may even inspire a non-practicing Catholic to return to the Church.

Can a non-Catholic, or a non-practicing Catholic have a Catholic funeral?

Yes. All Baptized Christians have a right to Christian burial, including non-Catholic Christians. However, families should take the person's circumstances into consideration. For example, if the person was a faithful, practicing member of a non-Catholic church, perhaps the funeral should take place in that church instead of in the Catholic Church. Catholics who have fallen away from the Church may also have funeral Masses. However, if the person was known to have rejected the Church or simply would not have wanted a Catholic funeral, it may be more appropriate not to have a Catholic funeral. If, for some reason, it would cause public scandal to have a Catholic funeral for someone, this should not be done (or at least not publicly). Bishops may set different guidelines for funerals in their dioceses.

A Catholic Understanding of Funerals (part 3 of 3)

Can someone who has committed suicide have a Catholic funeral?

Yes. We must keep in mind the purposes of a Catholic funeral: praying for the person's salvation and helping the family members through their time of grief. Both of these things are greatly needed when someone commits suicide. We must keep in mind that people who commit suicide are very often psychologically unwell and are not completely responsible for their actions. Only God knows a person's mind, heart, and soul at the moment of death.

Can we do special things to remember our deceased loved ones during the funeral, for example, having their favorite song played?

We must keep in mind that the funeral Mass is governed by the rules of the Church's liturgy. We are not at liberty to make changes, or to introduce non-religious elements into the Mass. However, the vigil at the funeral home can provide ample time for remembering the deceased with songs, symbols, traditions, eulogies, etc. as the family desires. Some of these things may also be done at the cemetery after the priest or deacon completes the Rite of Committal.

Can someone give a eulogy at a Catholic funeral?

Different parishes have different policies on this. Some permit words of remembrance at the funeral Mass, others do not. These remarks should be centered on the *faith* of the deceased person. The funeral Mass is not the time for sharing memories, telling jokes, etc. that have nothing to do with the person's faith. Most parishes that permit words of remembrance at the funeral Mass insist that there be only one speaker, and that he or she limit the remarks to just a few minutes. If families would like to eulogize their loved one, they are highly encouraged to do this at the funeral home, where there is more time and fewer restrictions, instead of speaking at the Mass.

Is it necessary for the burial to take place in a Catholic cemetery or mausoleum?

No. Catholics may be buried in any cemetery or mausoleum. During the Rite of Committal, the priest or deacon will bless the place of burial if it is not already blessed.

Is cremation permitted?

Yes. In years past, cremation was not permitted because it was seen as a denial of the resurrection of the human body. Today, the Catholic Church does permit cremation as long as it is not chosen for reasons that contradict our faith. (The God who created the universe out of nothing can surely resurrect a body that has been cremated.) Here in the Diocese of Allentown, it is permitted to have a funeral Mass with cremated remains present. However, the ideal situation would be to have the body present for the funeral, and then cremate afterwards.

Can cremated remains be scattered? Can they be kept at home in the family's possession?

No. Cremated remains must be properly buried in a cemetery or mausoleum. This is meant to show respect and reverence for the human body and hope for the resurrection. It is forbidden to hold Catholic funeral rites unless the family plans to give the remains a proper burial.

But what if my loved one already expressed wishes that his or her remains be scattered?

What should a family do in a situation where their deceased loved one has requested something that is not permitted in Catholic funerals? We must always do what is right, even if it is contrary to a loved one's wishes. It is neither unloving nor disrespectful to them. All that matters is their eternal rest and happiness, which is not at all affected if their exact wishes are not carried out during the funeral.