



# CATHOLIC FUNERALS

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

*As you begin to prepare your own funeral or plan for the funeral of a loved one, the information found in this pamphlet will be helpful to you. Just as your Catholic faith has guided you through life, it will support and guide you in preparing to embrace death. Additional information on these topics may be obtained by consulting the Sacramental Guidelines of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee or by calling the archdiocesan Chancery Office.*

### **1 Where is the basic understanding and theology of Catholic funerals to be found?**

The Order of Christian Funerals, published in 1989, contains a clear theology of the attitude of the Catholic Church toward life after death and thus the respect the Church has for the human person, body and soul. An appendix to this ritual on cremation was published in 1997. The use of both is mandated in the United States.

### **2 How is respect to be shown to the deceased?**

The body of the deceased is to be buried (interment) or entombed in a mausoleum (entombment). These practices demonstrate Christian faith in awaiting the resurrection. (Cremation is covered later, in a separate section.)

### **3 May Catholics who have been divorced and remarried outside the Church or who have committed suicide be buried with a Catholic ceremony?**

Yes. Such circumstances of themselves do not exclude the possibility of a Catholic burial. In individual cases the Chancery Office of the archdiocese should be consulted.

## **OVERVIEW OF CHRISTIAN FUNERAL RITES**

### **4 How many parts make up the funeral rites?**

There are three main parts: 1) the Vigil, 2) the Funeral Liturgy (with or without Mass) and 3) the Rite of Committal. Besides these, other rites are provided, e.g., prayers just after death, prayers for gathering in the presence of the body at the beginning of a visitation, and prayers for transferring the body to the church.

### **5 Must funeral rites be led by priests?**

The ritual of the Catholic Church allows for priests or deacons, to conduct the various services including the Vigil, a Funeral Liturgy apart from a Funeral Mass, and the Rite of Committal. Lay leaders of prayer may conduct the Vigil and the Rite of Committal.

**6 How best can families prepare for these rites?**

Family and friends may and should actively participate in planning these rites. Such working together can aid in the grieving process. There are many options in the rituals that provide for a variety of approaches. The final wishes of the deceased are to be respected to the extent possible.

**7 May any of the rites be omitted?**

Since the three rites flow one into another and provide a time of consolation for family members and friends through the liturgy, it seems best to use all three rites.

## **PRAYERS AFTER DEATH**

**8 When should the parish be notified?**

The parish priest should be notified of a death as soon as possible. He or another parish minister can then meet with the family and pray for the repose of the newly deceased.

Gathering in the Presence of the Body

**9 When is this gathering to be held?**

As the family gathers at the funeral home or in the church for the first viewing of the body, it is appropriate to say the ritual prayers. It is also a time of quiet prayer and reflection.

## **THE VIGIL**

**10 What is the difference between a Vigil and a visitation?**

A visitation is simply a gathering of friends who wish to view or be present with the remains of the deceased, console the relatives, reminisce about the past, and share stories of the deceased. A Vigil is the prayer designated in the Ritual and held during a visitation. The Vigil ought not to be held apart from the visitation, preventing the participation of those visiting the family. Should a visitation in church immediately precede a Funeral Mass, the Vigil is not used.

**11 Where should a Vigil be held?**

The Order of Christian Funerals allows for the Vigil to be held in various places. It can be held in the home of the deceased, in a funeral home, in a nursing home, or in the parish church, but not directly preceding the Mass.

**12 Are the recitation of the rosary and other wake prayer services permitted?**

The Vigil is the official prayer designated by the Church for this occasion and is found in the Order of Christian Funerals. It includes prayers for the deceased and recognizes the person's Christian life. The recitation of the rosary and other private devotions are permitted but should be held at a time other than the Vigil and should never take the place of the official Vigil.

**13 What opportunities are present to share memories?**

The Vigil and the visitation are appropriate times for family and friends to share stories and remembrances of the deceased. The Vigil ought to be scheduled at a time when friends and acquaintances can attend.

## **THE FUNERAL LITURGY**

**14 When may Funeral Masses be celebrated?**

Generally, Funeral Masses are celebrated on weekdays, at a time when most people can attend. The Funeral Mass may be celebrated on any day except Sundays, Holy Days, and the Easter Triduum (Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday). Sunday evening is often considered an anticipation of Monday, and thus a Funeral Mass can be permitted by the individual pastor at that time. On days when a Funeral Mass is not permitted, the body may be brought to the church for a prayer service. At a suitable time later, a memorial Mass may be celebrated. It is important for families to be in contact with the parish as to the time of a funeral Mass before completing these arrangements with funeral directors for publication.

**15 What is the preferred site for a Funeral Mass?**

The preferred site for a Funeral Mass is a parish church. The use of chapels and oratories is not permitted for the Funeral Mass. An exception can be made for Catholic nursing homes that have a permanent chapel if the deceased had been a longtime resident there. The pastor of the home parish should be informed of these plans.

**16 Which church is most appropriate for a Funeral Mass?**

The home parish church of the deceased is the most appropriate church for the Funeral Mass because the parish has the obligation to care for its members. However, in certain circumstances it is possible to celebrate the Mass at the home parish of relatives. The pastor of the deceased should be informed of these plans.

**17 Can non-Catholics be pallbearers at a Catholic funeral?**

Yes, provided those chosen are of good repute.

**18 What kind of music is appropriate for a Funeral Mass?**

The whole congregation should be able to participate in the music chosen. Solos are out of place. The Lord's Prayer should never be sung as a solo. Secular music (e.g., "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling", "Ol' Man River," and the like) is not appropriate.

**19 May a Funeral Mass be ill-advised in some circumstances?**

Only by way of exception should a Funeral Liturgy, distinct from the Mass, be used for a deceased baptized Catholic. Such situations might be the funeral of a person who never or rarely participated in the life of the Church or who had publicly repudiated Catholicism. In these instances, it would be more advised to celebrate an appropriate liturgy in a funeral home. On the other hand, non-practicing family members should not discourage a Funeral Mass in the parish church for family members who were practicing Catholics simply because of their own rejection of the Church or non-involvement.

**20 How does a homily differ from a eulogy?**

A homily breaks open the readings from Sacred Scripture that had been proclaimed, while a eulogy ("to speak well of someone") praises the deceased. The homily takes its theme from the biblical readings and speaks in general of the Catholic belief in the Resurrection, life after death, and the qualities of Christian living. The virtues of the deceased can be cited as examples. A homily is appropriate at the Vigil or the Funeral Mass. A eulogy is more appropriate when spoken at the funeral home during the visitation, the Vigil, or at a family gathering after the Rite of Committal.

**21 What is appropriate to use in a family's "remarks of remembrance"?**

"Remarks of remembrance" can be inserted at the end of the Mass before the prayers of Commendation. Only one relative or friend should speak. These remarks are not to be a eulogy but, rather, a brief word of thanksgiving for the life of the deceased. These remarks are optional. If done, the remarks should be concise and written out beforehand.

## **THE RITE OF COMMITTAL**

**22 What is the Rite of Committal?**

After the Funeral Mass or Funeral Service without Mass, the body is taken to the cemetery for burial. The Rite of Committal, or final farewell, is prayed at that time.

**23 Where should the Rite of Committal take place?**

Ordinarily, the Rite of Committal takes place at the graveside. According to the ritual it may take place completely in the church, completely in the cemetery, or partly in the church and partly in the cemetery. Often inclement weather determines where the Rite of Committal takes place. If done in a cemetery chapel, the final leave-taking should not seem to be hurried. The prayers of committal recognize that the place of interment or entombment has been transformed by means of Christ's death and resurrection.

**24 Must a Catholic be buried in a Catholic Cemetery?**

The normal situation is to bury a Catholic in a Catholic cemetery. However, a Catholic may be buried in another cemetery according to circumstances. Non-Catholics may also be buried in a Catholic cemetery with

Catholic family members, relatives, or friends. A member of the clergy of the Church of the one being buried can certainly be invited to conduct burial services at the gravesite.

**25 Can a flag be substituted for the funeral pall over the casket during the Liturgy?**

No. The casket should be covered with the white pall as a reminder of baptism.

## **CREMATION**

**26 Can Catholics be cremated?**

Yes, the bodies of Catholics may be cremated. Cremation is permitted as long as the body is not cremated as a protest against the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead. Families do not need to ask for church permission for a loved one to be cremated.

**27 What kind of container is appropriate?**

Worthy containers, such as the classic funeral urn, are appropriate. Keeping the ashes in pieces of jewelry, in statuary, or other objects are unacceptable practices.

**28 Where are the ashes to be placed?**

The ashes must be placed in a grave or niche in a mausoleum known as a columbarium. They are never to be kept in the possession of the family or scattered, since these practices are not the reverent disposition the Church requires.

**29 May the ashes be present for a Funeral Mass?**

It is strongly preferable for the body to be present for the Funeral Mass. After the Mass the body may be cremated. If, for extraordinary reasons, this is not possible, the ashes should be present. If the ashes are not present, the Funeral Mass prescribed in the ritual is not celebrated. In that case a memorial Mass may be appropriate.

**30 May the ashes be mixed with cremated remains of other individuals, pets, or other objects?**

No. Because of our belief in the resurrection of the body, we find such practices repulsive. This practice has never been acceptable.

## **MEMORIALIZING THE DECEASED**

**31 What are good ways to memorialize the deceased?**

There are a number of ways to remember the deceased. One traditional way is through Mass offerings. Having Masses celebrated for the deceased is a laudable Catholic practice. Since Catholics believe in praying for the dead, this remains a fitting way to memorialize the deceased.

Other ways would be to give something to the parish memorial/endowment fund or to the poor or another worthy cause in memory of the deceased.

## **OTHER QUESTIONS**

**32 May persons pre-plan their funerals?**

Yes. It is important that people plan their funeral and make clear their wishes ahead of time. In this way they can be sure that the funeral rites will reflect their Catholic Faith. Such planning also is the best way to avoid heavier financial burdens later. It is also wise to share with relatives one's wishes for the funeral. It follows that the family or those charged with arranging a funeral ought to respect the wishes of the deceased regarding their funeral rites.

**33 May a person donate organs?**

The donation of one's organs has become commonplace and is commendable. The donation of the entire body for scientific study is also permitted. In these instances, the proper disposition of the body is to be done according to accepted practices.

**34 How can the funeral of a loved one affect faith?**

The Christian faith in life after death becomes more real for us when a loved one dies. We continue to pray for the deceased as we did for them during life on earth.

Planning and participating in the funeral rites can deepen our own faith and hope in the life to come. The prayers and scripture readings we choose speak to life everlasting, where we shall see one another again.

**35 Can bequests be made for Mass intentions so a parish will benefit?**

Because of their commitment to a beloved parish, many people choose to name it in their last will and testament. They also wish to remain connected to the faith community by being remembered in prayer. Too frequently, however, the wording in their wills defeats their good intentions.

When a bequest is made to a parish for the offering of Masses (For example, "I bequeath to St. X Parish \$5,000 for Masses to be said for my intentions."), the entire amount must be set aside for Mass offerings (totaling 500 Masses). None of the bequest may go toward support of the parish and its programs or ministry because Mass offerings are given to the priest who celebrates the Mass, not to the parish.

**36 How should bequests to parishes be made?**

If donors want the parish to benefit from their generosity, they should word their wills so that the bequest is clearly directed to the parish itself. They may also request that their intention be remembered in Masses, but such a request must be separate from the amount of their bequest to the parish.

**37 What about Mass intentions for the deceased?**

Praying for the deceased is an important act of faith and connects us to those who have preceded us in death. We may wish to request a Mass be offered for a loved one's intention, or we may wish to specify a small amount in our will for a Mass to be offered for our own intention.

It is important to remember, however, that every Sunday and holy day, the pastor offers the "Mass for the People" for the intentions of living and deceased members of the parish. Thus, even in death, parishioners are remembered at these Masses.

Since the breadth of God's mercy is beyond our human calculations, it is difficult to understand how, from a faith perspective, we could feel the need for large numbers of Masses to be offered for any one person's intention.



**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, CONTACT:**

Archdiocese of Milwaukee  
[www.archmil.org](http://www.archmil.org)

The Chancery Office  
Telephone: 414-769-3340  
E-mail: [chancery@archmil.org](mailto:chancery@archmil.org)

Catholic Cemeteries  
[www.cemeteries.org](http://www.cemeteries.org)