



DIRECTIVES FOR CATHOLIC FUNERALS: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Who can be buried from the Church?

Any baptized Catholic can be buried from the Church - those who have been most faithful in the practice and those who have been less faithful or separated from the Church, through illness, distance or special circumstances. Non-Catholic members of a parishioner's family may be buried from the Church unless it was contrary to their wishes and will during their life. Catechumens who are in the process of the Rite of Christian Initiation are also to be buried from the Church. Children are honored with Christian burial if the parents intended for the child to be baptized but the child died prior to baptism. Unless there was some indication of repentance prior to their death, funerals would only be denied to apostates, heretics and schismatics, and those who are such notorious sinners that providing the funeral rites would cause scandal.

2. Can those who have died as a result of suicide be buried from the Church?

Yes, previous laws forbidding such have been changed. There are prayers included in the **Order of Christian Funerals** (OCF) for this circumstance.

3. May someone who has not been able to attend Church for a few years because of their living in a nursing home still be buried from a parish church?

Yes. Absence from their parish due to such circumstances does not separate them from the community of the Church and a Funeral Liturgy.

4. Why does the Church not sacramentally anoint bodies after death?

One purpose of the Sacrament of the Sick and its anointing of the living person is to instill hope and healing before death. After death, when healing can no longer take place, the Church has other prayers but does not anoint the dead body.

The Church provides a number of rites or liturgies as parishes offer the ministry of consolation to families experiencing sickness and death. First, for the sick, the Church has the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. As soon as a person is seriously sick or injured, the parish should be called to request the anointing. This anointing can be received many times in one's life and should not be limited to the last hour of life. After death, the Church does not anoint the body but offers other special prayers commending the soul to the Merciful Lord.

The Anointing of the Sick can be received many times by a Catholic. Pastors often remind their parishioners that the sick are to be anointed at the beginning of a serious illness as well as through the various stages of the illness as it progresses. The sacrament is not reserved to be celebrated only within the last hours of one's life. The Sacrament of the Sick is for the living and the hope of being reunited at the Altar of the Lord. Once a person dies, the priest may offer different prayers for the dead but does not anoint the body.





5. *At the time of death, whom do we call to set things in motion?*

If a person dies unexpectedly at home, the local public safety department must be called first. If a person is under hospice care, the hospice nurse should be called first and they will then help you with the subsequent procedures. Funeral directors specialize in serving the needs of families at the time of death and will also assist in the notification of the pertinent people or agencies. The local parish may be called directly by the family or the funeral director. After the parish is notified and has confirmed the day and time of the funeral, the family will most likely be asked to come to the parish in order to collect further information regarding the deceased and begin to plan the funeral rites. It also gives the parish the opportunity to offer their sympathy through their bereavement ministry.

6. *What are the funeral rites?*

The Order of Christian Funerals (OCF) consists of a number of rituals, divided into three key times of prayer for families.

The **Vigil for the Deceased** is the official prayer of the Church and should never be omitted. Taking the form of a Liturgy of the Word, the **Vigil** consists of scripture readings, a brief homily (or a reflection if led by a lay minister), intercessions and prayers. Its focus is on the Word of God as the family experiences death and their subsequent grief. Music is also encouraged to be a part of this prayer, which can be led by various parish bereavement ministers besides the priest or deacon. The **Vigil** is also an appropriate place for family and friends to offer their own words or stories (eulogy). Additional non-biblical readings or poems may be included in addition to the readings from scripture. Favorite non-liturgical music may also be played. While the Rosary is still a popular devotion, it is not a part of nor is it meant to replace the Vigil. It may be prayed by the family at any time during the visitation hours.

The center of the OCF is **The Funeral Liturgy**. “At the funeral liturgy the community gathers with the family and friends of the deceased to give praise and thanks to God for Christ’s victory over sin and death, to commend the deceased to God’s tender mercy and compassion, and to seek strength in the proclamation of the paschal mystery.” (OCF 129) *The clear focus in the funeral liturgy is not to keep alive the memory of the deceased but rather God’s abiding presence and the wonders of his grace in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus, in which we participate through our baptism and lives of discipleship.* Perhaps more than any other rite, this liturgy distinguishes our Roman Catholic tradition from other common funeral practices.

The first form of the funeral liturgy is “The Funeral Mass.” It begins recalling our baptism, when we first shared Christ’s victory over sin and death, as the casket is blessed with holy water and clothed with a white garment (the pall) and then placed by the Easter Candle near the altar. As we celebrate the Word of God as at every Mass, the homily follows. The homily “should dwell on God’s compassionate love and on the paschal mystery of the Lord, as proclaimed in the Scripture readings. The homilist should also help the members of the assembly to understand that the mystery of God’s love and the mystery of Jesus’ victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased” and in our present lives as well. (OCF 27) Hence the homily is never to be a eulogy. Mass continues in the usual way until after communion, when the prayers of Final Commendation and Farewell concludes the Mass, followed by the procession to the place of burial.

The second form of the funeral liturgy is “The Funeral Liturgy outside Mass” and is celebrated when a priest is not available, when a Funeral Mass is prohibited on certain days





or when it is judged it might be a more appropriate celebration due to various reasons. This ritual follows the same format of the Funeral Mass with the exception of the Eucharistic Prayer and reception of Holy Communion. It may be celebrated in a parish church, a funeral home or another chapel.

The Rite of Committal brings to conclusion the funeral rites at the grave, tomb or crematorium. These brief prayers may be led by a priest, deacon or a lay minister or by a member of the family.

7. Are Catholics allowed to be cremated?

The Church still recommends, and prefers, the pious custom of burying the bodies of the Faithful, out of respect for the body that has given evidence of God's spirit enlivening our souls which are destined to be raised on the great Day of Resurrection. Nonetheless, the Church allows cremation as long as it is not an intentional denial of the Church's teaching regarding the Resurrection of the body. Note, however, *The Order of Christian Funerals* is arranged such that cremation of the deceased takes place after the funeral liturgy and not before it. However, when this is not possible, the cremated remains are permitted to be present for the Funeral Liturgy, either the Mass or outside of Mass.

8. What Scripture readings are allowed?

There are at least fifty-five various readings of Scriptures that the Church has specifically chosen for funerals. When you meet in your parish church to plan the funeral rites, they will be shared with you at that time or you can request the Scripture readings from the parish in advance of the meeting. Non-Scripture readings are not permitted.

9. Who can read the readings at the Funeral Mass?

Non-Catholics are not allowed to read the Scripture readings at Mass but may do so at the other rites in the OCF. All readers must be well prepared for the proclamation and believe in what they are proclaiming, engaging the gathered assembly through their eye contact, tone, rhythm and pace of the reading.

10. What music is allowed?

"Music is integral to the Funeral rites. It allows the community to express convictions and feelings that word alone may fail to convey. It has the power to console and uplift the mourners and to strengthen the unity of the assembly in faith and love. The texts of the songs chosen for a particular celebration should express the paschal mystery of the Lord's suffering, death, and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture." (OCF 30) Popular non-liturgical songs are not to be used in the Funeral Liturgy.

11. Can we have a eulogy?

A eulogy is not allowed during the Funeral Liturgy. Family or friends may be invited to share such a testimony at the **Vigil** or at the memorial luncheon or reception that often follows the funeral. The OCF does allow for a family member or friend to "speak in remembrance of the deceased before the final commendation begins" (OCF 170), however those words should not be a eulogy.

12. Are priests the only ones who can lead the Scripture service or the Cemetery service?

Deacons, religious and lay ministers are also designated to preside at the **Vigil** (Scripture) service and the cemetery **Rite of Committal**. These are not services that are restricted to a





priest. Many parishes have lay bereavement ministers assigned to these significant rites of the Christian funeral.

13. What do we do with the cremated remains after the funeral?

The cremated remains must always be treated with respect, the same respect we attribute to the body. After the funeral they are to be interred or entombed, preferably in a Catholic cemetery, mausoleum or columbarium. The **Rite of Committal** should accompany this action. They should never be separated or scattered or disposed in any way other than a dignified interment or entombment.

14. Can we plan our funeral arrangements months or years in advance?

Individuals are certainly encouraged to plan their funeral, just as they make arrangements for a will, and for the financial means to pay for their funeral. This relieves some pressure from the family during the emotional grieving process immediately after death. It also clarifies for the remaining family members or representative your wishes, e.g., the Funeral Mass, place of burial, music, readings, pall bearers, etc. Once these specifics for the funeral liturgy are known, the family then is left with arranging for the day of the funeral with the local parish church, funeral home and cemetery.

15. What is the difference between a Funeral Mass and a Memorial Mass?

A Funeral Mass has the body of the deceased or the cremated remains of the deceased present and has all the special prayers attributed to that Mass. When the body or the cremated remains are not present it is called a Memorial Mass.

16. Are Funeral Masses allowed in funeral homes?

Funeral Masses are not allowed in funeral homes. The Funeral Liturgy outside of Mass, as provided in the Order of Christian Funerals, is allowed in the funeral home.

17. Why can't we schedule the funeral in the parish when we want it?

Funerals are certainly important in the life of a family and also to the parish. Each parish is unique, however, in the capabilities of schedule, procedures and availability of ministers. Many parishes have set times for funerals mindful that two funerals are possible in one day in addition to the celebration of other Masses and weddings. Parishes might also have some planned activities or events that would not be suitable in providing the best or most appropriate environment for a Funeral Mass to be celebrated at the same time.

18. Are there some days where funerals are not allowed by the Church?

A Funeral Mass can be celebrated any day except on Holy Days of Obligation, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter and the Sundays of the Advent, Lent and Easter seasons. On these prohibited days, the funeral liturgy outside of Mass, without the distribution of communion, is permitted followed by the Rite of Committal. In this circumstance, a Memorial Mass for the deceased may be celebrated later at the convenience of the family and local parish.

19. Is there a fee to the church?

There is not a fee to be buried from the Church. If the family has the means and wishes to make a donation to the parish, it would be appropriate and welcomed, considering the parish resources that are used for the staff, building, etc. Some parishes do contract





separately for the musician and may ask the family to cover that cost. There is never a direct fee for the parish priest, deacon or lay minister. Given the financial challenges many of our parishes experience, a generous donation at the time of funeral is very much appreciated, even being mindful of services provided to the deceased throughout the years as a parishioner.

20. Why are we encouraged to pray for the dead?

“At the death of a Christian, whose life of faith was begun in the waters of baptism and strengthened at the eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of its confident belief that death is not the end nor does it break the bonds forged in life.” (OCF 4) The dead need our prayers as we pray for God’s mercy and petition His forgiveness for all of their sins. In addition, our prayers for the dead remind us that we are not separated from them as it strengthens our communion with all the saints. Such prayer is also beneficial to us as we prepare for our own passing from this life to the next. We pray for the dead not only in our own personal prayers but also through Mass offerings. There we join in the celebration of Christ’s death and resurrection and our desire and hope to share His victory with all those who have died in the same faith of Jesus Christ. The Church has the annual celebration of All Souls Day every November 2 to commemorate all the faithful departed. Many parishes offer a special Mass on or around this day to especially remember those buried from the parish during the past year. Masses for the deceased on the anniversary of their death, their birthday or other days are another way to offer our prayers for the dead.

