

A GUIDE FOR
PLANNING

CATHOLIC FUNERALS



DEATH: ITS SIGNIFICANCE

The death of one who is close to us is a difficult moment in the life of a family, and perhaps also for the community. It involves a sense of loss since those with whom we have shared life are no longer with us. In the light of Christian faith, however, the true significance of death is revealed. Its true meaning gives hope.

Death, for a Christian, is the gateway to eternal life in Christ. As St. Paul reminds us, even though we mourn, we are given hope and comfort in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

(cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17.)



THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

The pastoral ministry of the Church and its funeral rites is directed to placing the event of death in the context of our Christian faith. The funeral liturgy is a privileged moment for the family and believing community to offer worship, praise and thanks to God for the gift of the deceased, to commend the departed to the mercy of God, and to offer to the grieving the consolation that comes from the Word of God and celebration of Christ's saving sacrifice in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

1. VIGIL FOR THE DECEASED

The Church provides rites for use during the period between the time of death and the funeral Mass. In this way, the Church prayerfully accompanies the family through the initial time of adjustment following the death of a loved one, helping them to draw comfort and hope from Christian faith. These prayers normally take place at either the parish church or the funeral home, in the presence of family, friends and members of the parish community.

2. FUNERAL LITURGY

When one of its own dies, the Church earnestly desires that the family and friends of the deceased gather with members of the parish community for the celebration of the funeral Mass. This takes place in the parish church. We are strengthened by the scriptural proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and by the eucharistic presence of our Lord, whose own passover from death to life gives hope to all who die believing in Him.

3. THE RITE OF COMMITTAL

The funeral rites conclude with the rite of committal, celebrated at the place of interment. The family and other members of the Church prayerfully offer their final act of respect toward the loved one's body, which will be raised up on the last day in accordance with the promise of Christ.



GUIDELINES FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE FUNERAL LITURGY

Over the years, especially as society has become more secularized, different practices have emerged which sometimes obscure or even take the place of the Christian perspective on death. For this reason it is necessary to have certain guidelines, which preserve and emphasize the Christian character of the funeral rites, and thus serve to give real consolation and hope to our people when a loved one dies.

It is very helpful for family members to meet with the parish priest as soon as possible after the death of a loved one in order to plan the funeral celebration in accordance with Archdiocesan policy. The priest is ready to meet and support the family by offering the consolation that comes from faith and expressing the care and concern of the entire parish community.

THE PLACE OF THE FUNERAL

The proper place for the funeral liturgy is in the church of the parish community to which the deceased belonged.

Normally, this should be a funeral

Mass. For pastoral reasons, the

parish priest may determine

that a funeral liturgy without the celebration of Mass is

appropriate. This, too, is most properly celebrated in the

parish church. In exceptional circumstances, and at the

sole discretion of the parish priest, a funeral liturgy without

Mass may be celebrated in the funeral home. When this occurs, the official rites of the Church are to be used.



FUNERAL MASSES ON SUNDAY

On the first day of the week, the day of the Lord Jesus, God our Father assembles His people to sing His praises. Sunday has a unique place in Christian worship. It is a day for the whole community to gather to celebrate the Eucharist in communion with the universal Church. Mass on this day is to be celebrated in accordance with the readings and prayers set forth by the Church in the liturgical calendar. For this reason, it is not a day for particular celebrations such as funeral Masses.

In Canada funeral Masses may be celebrated any day other than Sundays, Christmas Day, New Year's Day, Holy Thursday, and during the Easter Triduum (from the Mass of the Lord's Supper to Easter Sunday inclusively).

SYMBOLS OF OUR FAITH



During the funeral liturgy one sees simple yet powerful symbols that reflect our hope in the resurrection. The paschal candle is lit to show that Christ is the light that dispels the darkness of sin and death; holy water is sprinkled to recall the new life of baptism; and the casket is covered with a white pall, which symbolizes the Christian dignity of all the baptized. When the body is brought to the church, any symbols that may have adorned

the coffin, such as national flags or insignia of associations to which the deceased belonged, are removed in favour of the pall.

In this way the unsurpassable dignity given in baptism and the fundamental equality of all before God is symbolized.

Insignia and other items, such as pictures, are most appropriately displayed at the funeral home during the visitation or in the parish centre during the reception following the Mass. With the permission of the parish priest, they may also be displayed in a suitable place in the church, but never in such a way as to take away from the primary symbolism of pall and paschal candle, used to highlight the baptismal dignity of the deceased, a status that surpasses all earthly achievement or association.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

The readings for the Mass are always taken from the Sacred Scriptures.

The Word of God announces Christian faith in the risen life: that we must face death, that Christ has conquered death, and that his victory can become ours.

Only passages from the Sacred Scriptures may be read during the funeral liturgy. If they are desired, all poetry, devotional or philosophical readings may be read either at the funeral home vigil service, following the committal service at the cemetery or during the reception following the liturgy.



EULOGIES AT FUNERALS

Catholics may be surprised to learn, as they prepare for the funeral liturgy, that a eulogy is not permitted and there is no provision for a eulogy by a family member or friend in the ritual. The General Introduction to the Order of Christian Funerals quite clearly states that the homily after the gospel reading is never to be a eulogy. Eulogies are often a significant feature in non-Catholic funerals, but Catholics should understand that this is not an element of Catholic tradition or liturgy.

The word “eulogy” refers to speech or writing that offers high praise, particularly for one who has died. When Christians gather for the funeral Mass, we do so to praise God the Father, who has given us eternal life in His Son, and who is merciful to those who die believing in Jesus.

In the Christian funeral, we gather not to praise the deceased but to pray for them.

For this reason, eulogies are not given.

The fact that a eulogy is not permitted does not mean that there can be no reference to the deceased person during the homily. Those who preach are directed to dwell on God’s compassionate love and the paschal mystery as proclaimed in the Scripture readings. As well, they are directed to be attentive to the grief of those present and to help them understand the mystery of God’s love and the paschal mystery in the life of the deceased person and in their own lives. References to the person’s life of faith and love are obviously appropriate. It is the “high praise” of a eulogy in the strict sense of the word, praise that has no reference to Christian life and is sometimes exaggerated, that is out of place in an act of worship.

It is natural that members of the family of the deceased may wish to speak publicly in remembrance of their loved one. A very effective way of doing so is at the celebration of the vigil prayers during the period of visitation at the funeral home, at the cemetery or during the reception following the liturgy. Indeed, these are moments when a number of persons may speak and share their memories. Families may wish to publicize this as part of the obituary notice. If these occasions are not possible, the Archbishop gives permission for words of remembrance to be spoken in the church, but only before the funeral liturgy begins with the formal reception of the body or entrance procession. Words of remembrance are not permitted at the end of the liturgy. In church, such words should be limited to five minutes in duration, and the text is to be reviewed beforehand by the presiding priest or deacon.

MUSIC

Music has a powerful and healing effect on us during the liturgy. If the funeral is taking place within a specific liturgical season (Advent, Lent, Christmas, Easter) it will be most appropriate to have hymns that reflect this, in order to connect the death of the deceased with the rhythm of the Church's liturgical year. All music in the church must be liturgical in nature. Secular or recorded music is not appropriate in church. The choice of hymns is to be made in dialogue with the presiding priest and the music ministers of the parish.



CREMATION

Even though the Church retains its preference for the burial of the body, after the example of Christ's own burial, permission has been granted for Catholics to be cremated. If the choice for cremation is made, the Church strongly encourages Catholics to have it take place after the Mass of Christian Burial has been celebrated. This allows the full liturgical funeral rites to be celebrated in the presence of the body, which, as the temple of the Holy Spirit, is accorded great honour in the Christian tradition.

Furthermore, when cremation takes place immediately after death, the family is deprived of the psychologically important opportunity to take leave of their loved one.

In keeping with a spirit of reverence and in Christian anticipation of the resurrection of the body, the Church asks that all cremated remains be buried in a grave, or placed in a mausoleum or columbarium, as soon as possible after the funeral Mass or Liturgy.



A specific place for a person's remains helps focus the remembering and prayer for the deceased person by the family and friends, and by the Church in general.

Also, such a place will make it easier to memorialize the deceased, for example, with plaques which record names and dates.

Scattering cremated remains over water, in the air, on the ground, separating them for placement in different locations, or keeping them in homes does not display appropriate Christian reverence and hope, and, therefore, should not be done.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Please do not hesitate to contact your parish priest if you have any further questions.

Contact information for all parishes in the Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton can be found at

www.caedm.ca/ParishesMassTimes

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