

# Order of Christian Funerals

“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 . . . . Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God.” (*Order of Christian Funerals, 4-5*)

## Funeral Rites

The Catholic Church has a beautiful three-part plan for funerals. If our schedules permitted, members of the community would walk with the bereaved family through all three parts of the funeral rites (from vigil through burial). Each of these rites has a distinctive purpose and is described below.

- The Vigil for the Deceased (sometimes called the Wake)
- The Funeral Liturgy
- The Rite of Committal (Burial)

### 1. Vigil for the Deceased

The Vigil is the official prayer of the church for the deceased in the time following death and before the funeral liturgy; or if there is no funeral liturgy, before the rite of committal. It should not be omitted or replaced by devotional prayers (such as the rosary). Devotional prayers may be offered in addition to the celebration of the Vigil for the Deceased either at the time of the Vigil itself, or at another time. The vigil may take place in the home of the deceased, at a funeral home, or in church. A priest, deacon or layperson may preside at this liturgy. The vigil consists of readings from sacred Scripture, songs, psalms and intercessions. A brief homily or reflection is included. The vigil is the preferred time for family and friends to tell stories, and to offer reflections and eulogies. In today’s society, the vigil has often been minimized by a lack of participation by friends and family, who sometimes spend only a few moments at the funeral home viewing the body and offering condolences to the family; but a full celebration of the vigil is the appropriate beginning of the funeral rites.

### 2. Funeral Liturgy

The Funeral Mass is the primary liturgical celebration of the Christian community for the deceased. The Funeral Liturgy (Mass) celebrates the life of the deceased Christian by reaffirming the baptismal share in Christ’s death and resurrection and looking forward to a continued share in that life in the kingdom of heaven. At the Funeral Liturgy the assembly receives the body of the deceased in a casket, which is sprinkled with holy water and has a pall placed upon it to recall the deceased’s baptism. Then the body is carried toward the altar and placed near the Easter candle. The Mass continues as usual. The homily is based on the readings and focuses on the paschal mystery (death/resurrection). A final commendation follows the prayer after Communion. Then the body is incensed (offered to God) and a song

of farewell is sung to affirm our hope in life everlasting. The body is then carried to the place of burial (committal).

### **3. Rite of Committal**

The Rite of Committal concludes the funeral rites. This brief rite helps the bereaved at this difficult time of parting. It includes a short Scriptural verse, the prayer of committal, intercessions, the Lord's Prayer and a blessing. The body is then lowered into the grave or placed in a tomb or crematorium. A song may conclude this rite.

## **Funeral Planning**

Most of us begin planning a funeral immediately after someone dies. However, it might be very helpful to our families if we could begin some funeral preparations while we are still alive. A copy of Sacred Heart Catholic Church's funeral planner follows.

### **When May Funeral Masses Be Celebrated?**

1. Funeral Masses may be celebrated on most days. However, they may not be celebrated on holy days.
2. Every effort should be made to avoid scheduling funeral Masses on these special days:
  - Sundays of Advent, Lent and Easter time.
  - Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday.  
Funeral rites on these days make use of a liturgy of the Word (not a Mass), closing with the rite of farewell (OCF, 177-203) Readings should be chosen to reflect the nature of these special days, rather than using the readings for a funeral mass.

### **Where should families celebrate the Funeral Rites?**

The Vigil service is celebrated in the presence of the body either in the funeral home or the Parish Church—ordinarily the day before the Funeral Liturgy. The Funeral Mass is always celebrated in the Church. A Funeral Liturgy Outside Mass may take place at a funeral home, nursing home chapel, or other appropriate place. The Committal Rite is preferably celebrated at the grave or the tomb.

### **Where can I find the readings and prayers of the funeral service?**

The Order of Christian Funerals has been published by numerous companies. Sacred Heart Parish or one of the Reedsburg funeral homes will give you a booklet that includes all of the texts so that you can prepare for the funeral rites. Our parish offices have copies of *Through Death to Life*—a booklet that lists all of the prayers and readings for the Funeral Mass, from which you may select your choices.

## **What should I do to begin preparing for the funeral rites?**

1. (If you are preparing for a funeral of someone who is deceased): Make an appointment to meet with the parish priest. (If you are preparing for a funeral of someone who is still living—including yourself): Ask the parish to borrow a funeral planning booklet.
2. Read through the introduction to the booklet you are given.
3. Make selections from the booklet based upon your preferences (there is a form in the back of the booklet for your convenience).
4. Use the “funeral planner” form on this web site to list your choices for readings, prayers, music, for people you want to take part in the funeral rites, and for special notes.

## **What is the Church’s position on Eulogies?**

*The Order of Christian Funerals* is very clear that a brief homily should be given at the funeral liturgy, but never any kind of eulogy to replace the homily (OCF, 141). This does not mean that the deceased cannot be spoken about in the homily, but that the Word of God must be primary. The homilist helps the assembly understand that the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus is operative in the life and death of the deceased. *The Order of Christian Funerals* also permits speaking in remembrance of the deceased at the Vigil for the Deceased. In fact, this is a better time to offer remembrances for the deceased than during the funeral Mass.

The bishop of each diocese may decide whether or not to permit eulogies at funeral liturgies and may establish the guidelines for them. Some dioceses do not permit them at all. In our diocese, Bishop Morlino has stated that “Liturgical norms allow a member or friend of the family to ‘speak in remembrance of the deceased’ after the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Nevertheless, I am asking that such words of remembrance not be spoken at any time during the funeral liturgy in the Diocese of Madison.” (Letter to Priests and Deacons of the Diocese, February 25, 2011)

## **What is the Church’s position on Cremation?**

*Catholics may be cremated.* The Church’s preference is for burial of the body; however cremation has been permitted since 1963 even though the cremated remains were not allowed to be present during the funeral Mass. In 1997 the Vatican gave the bishops of the U.S. permission to allow the funeral Mass with the presence of the cremated remains.

*When should cremation take place?* The Church prefers that it take place after the full funeral liturgy. “The presence of the body most clearly brings to mind the life and death of the person and better expresses the values that the Church affirms in its rites.” (*Questions Concerning Cremation*, Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, 1999.)

*Must cremated remains be buried?* Yes, they are to be buried in a family grave or urn garden or entombed in a mausoleum.

*May the cremated remains be scattered?* No. Scattering remains is not the reverent dispositions that the Church requires. (OCF, Appendix II, #417)





## **SUGGESTIONS FOR MUSIC FOR FUNERALS:**

You can find a list of music frequently used at funerals by clicking [here](#). This music list is by no means an exhaustive listing; it does not include every possible song that can be used at funerals nor does it purposely exclude any religious song that can be used at funerals. It is just presented as a starting point for your music selections. The list also references the Breaking Bread song numbers for the current year since that is the hymnal we use here at Sacred Heart. We highly recommend that you contact the Music Director at Sacred Heart Catholic Church and discuss your selections with him. He can advise you on the appropriateness of the selection for the specific part of the liturgy (for instance, the song for the Preparation of the Gifts does not need to be very long as there is no collection being taken).