



Faith in Five – Adults Death and the Catholic Funeral

1. “Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ. The New Testament speaks of judgment primarily in its aspect of the final encounter with Christ in his second coming, but also repeatedly affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith” (CCC 1021).
2. As Christians, our belief about life after death is based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ death on the cross atoned for our sins, and His resurrection is victory over death. Though physical death happens, the righteous who believe in Christ will be given eternal life. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that every spiritual soul “is immortal: It does not perish when it separates from the body at death, and it will be reunited with the body at the final Resurrection” (CCC 366).
3. **Catholic funerals** mark the beginning of the afterlife as a soul blessed at baptism is returned to God in thanksgiving at Mass. What determines a proper service is based on the decedent’s choices, wishes, lifestyle and manner of death. The most important decision to make is that the deceased receive a proper burial with dignity. Catholic funeral rites are not “a celebration of life” but an expression of Christian hope in eternal life and the resurrection of the body on the last day.
4. “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, the author of life and the hope of the just. The Mass, the memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral” ([Source](#)). There are two types of funeral liturgies: a Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy outside of Mass.

A **requiem Mass** (also known as Mass for the dead or Mass of the dead) includes Holy communion and is hosted in the local Catholic Church. It is offered for the repose of the soul of the deceased and follows the rubrics of the Roman Missal. The funeral Mass is officiated by a parish priest and would lead a funeral liturgy (service) outside of Mass. If a priest is not available, deacons may lead this service.

5. **Proper terms** describing elements of the Catholic Funeral Liturgy for print publications, notices and obituaries:
 - a. **Vigil for the deceased or Vigil for** (name of deceased);
 - b. **Funeral Mass for** (name of deceased);
 - c. When there is no Mass celebrated: **Funeral Liturgy for** (name of deceased);
 - d. When services occur sometime after death (as in the case of cremation) or after burial the following term is used: **A Mass for** (name of the deceased) **will be celebrated**. The term “Funeral Mass” or “Funeral Liturgy” is not used.
 - e. **Burial or Rite of Committal** (either term may be used).
 - f. **Cremated remains of the body** (proper term for the cremated remains). ([Source](#))

6. Burying the dead is a corporal act of mercy. Catholic churches prefer Catholics be buried in consecrated grounds, such as a Catholic cemetery. Graves and urns must be marked in some fitting manner. The Church believes the final disposition of a person is a sacred matter since the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

In 1963, the Catholic Church lifted its prohibition forbidding Catholics to choose **cremation**. Canon 1176 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law states, "The Church earnestly recommends the pious custom of burying the bodies of the dead be observed, it does not, however, forbid cremation unless it has been chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching." If cremation is preferred, the ashes must be contained in a sealed urn or container and not spread openly upon land or sea. Scattering the cremated remains of the body, keeping them at home or dividing them among various family members is not the reverent disposition the Church requires. Cremains must be shown proper respect, buried in a cemetery grave, mausoleum or columbarium niche.

7. The Catechism of the Catholic Church 2296 states, "...**Organ donation** after death is a noble and meritorious act and is to be encouraged as an expression of generous solidarity. It is not morally acceptable if the donor or his proxy has not given explicit consent...". Interestingly, in this 2011 [article](#), "Vatican officials say that after a pope dies, his body belongs to the entire Church and must be buried intact. Furthermore, if papal organs were donated, they would become relics in other bodies if he were eventually made a saint".
8. Symbols in the Funeral Rite ([Source](#))
 - a. **The Reception of the Deceased** at the entrance to the church, is a reminder that the church is the home of all Christians. At Baptism, we were received at the same door and the sprinkling of holy water at this time reminds us of the person's Baptism and initiation into the community of faith.
 - a. **Paschal candle** - the Easter candle, is lit as a sign of the light of Christ. Catholics believe that in the darkness the light of Christ is a sign of hope. It reminds the family that the deceased is now sharing in the life of Christ.
 - b. **The pall** - a large white sheet that is draped over the coffin, serves as a reminder that in baptism we became part of God's family and in death we share eternity with God.
 - c. **Holy water** - The sprinkling of holy water, a reminder of baptism, is a sign that in baptism the individual was made a disciple of Christ and that this continues in death.
 - d. **Crucifix or Bible** - A crucifix or Bible is placed on the coffin as a sign that the deceased has spent their life in dedication to God and the faith. The crucifix also reminds people of Christ's sacrifice on the cross so that we may have eternal life.
 - e. **Incense** - Incense is used as a reminder and sign that the prayers being offered are rising to Heaven to God with the soul of the deceased and is a symbol of farewell.
 - f. **The Readings, Prayers and Psalms** proclaim to us the promise of eternal life, convey the hope of being gathered together again in God's kingdom and support the witness of Christian life. Family members may participate in the choice of readings and psalms for the Mass. In the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word at the funeral liturgy, the biblical readings may not be replaced by nonbiblical readings. During prayer services with the family, nonbiblical readings may be used in addition to readings from Scripture.

g. **Liturgical color:** For funeral Masses in the United States, the sacred ministers may wear white, violet or black vestments. "The liturgical color chosen for funerals should express Christian hope but should not be offensive to human grief or sorrow."

9. From the General Introduction of the *Order of Christian Funerals* ([Source](#)):
"At the funeral rites, especially at the celebration of the eucharistic sacrifice, the Christian community affirms and expresses the union of the Church on earth with the Church in heaven in the one great communion of saints. Though separated from the living, the dead are still at one with the community of believers on earth and benefit from their prayers and intercession. At the rite of final commendation and farewell, the community acknowledges the reality of separation and commends the deceased to God".
10. **Overview of Catholic Funeral Rites** ([Source](#)) – three different parts
 - a. **Vigil Service** (Wake) – A wake is religious in nature, where a viewing is unstructured. "At the vigil, the Christian community keeps watch with the family in prayer to the God of mercy and finds strength in Christ's presence" (Order of Christian Funerals, no. 56). The vigil may include readings from Sacred Scripture with reflection and prayers and/or a recitation of the rosary. Vigils are also social opportunities for family and friends to gather to console each other. The vigil is the most fitting time for eulogies, recalling and honoring the life of the deceased.
 - b. **Mass of Christian Burial**– this is the central celebration of the community for the deceased. It includes Introductory Rites, the Liturgy of the Word and Liturgy of the Eucharist. The final commendation includes signs of farewell (incensation of casket or cremains and sprinkling of holy water), song of farewell, prayer of commendation and procession to the place of committal. "At the funeral liturgy, the Church gathers 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. The funeral liturgy, therefore, is an act of worship, and not merely an expression of grief".
 - c. **Rite of Committal** – (Burial or Internment). This is the final act of the community of faith, separating the deceased from the mourners. This is normally celebrated beside the open grave or place of interment. "..., [T]he community expresses the hope that, with all those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith, the deceased awaits the glory of the resurrection. The Rite of Committal is an expression of the communion that exists between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven: the deceased passes with the farewell prayers of the community of believers into the welcoming company of those who need faith no longer but see God face-to-face".
11. During the funeral Mass, we pray for the deceased soul to be guided to Heaven. A funeral liturgy of the Word and Final Commendation of the deceased can be celebrated in lieu of the Mass. The Church prohibits celebration of funeral Masses on holy days such as Holy Thursday, Triduum, Solemnities of Obligation, Sundays during Advent, Lent or Easter. A memorial Mass could be scheduled at a later date.

12. Families should contact the parish for funeral arrangements and will be informed of local guidelines and any required fees. If there is one available, families may work directly with a parish bereavement group, an outreach ministry to support members of the parish who are mourning the death of a loved one. The ministry provides personal contact during the time of grieving. This resource provides comfort to the family and guides their decision making in planning for the vigil service and funeral liturgy. The bereavement team may be involved in preparing the church for the funeral Mass. In some parishes, this team also participates in the liturgy, and supports the family during the service. The bereavement team may also provide prayer and outreach support post service.

According to Canon 1181, no one should be deprived of funeral rites because of an inability to give an offering. Gifts or stipends to ministering servants of the Mass should remain as freewill offerings.

13. In many cultures, some believe the mourning process lasts for 40 days, believing the souls of loved ones are undergoing the biggest transition from earthly life to the afterlife. Families and friends use their customs and practices to aid the deceased during this transition.

Roman Catholic doctrine rejects the 40th-day belief, despite this belief being so widespread in other sects of Catholicism. The Church believes judgment occurs at the time of death. The soul does not wander the Earth for any period of time. The soul will either travel directly to Heaven, Purgatory, or Hell (CCC, 1022).

14. Catholics offer Masses for the dead in order to shorten their time in Purgatory. Catholics believe that if a person has lived a good life but has committed venial sin then they will go to Purgatory where their soul will be cleansed before being allowed into Heaven. The offering of the Mass and prayers aim to shorten the amount of time spent in Purgatory so their soul can reach Heaven and be reunited with God. "It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins." (2 Maccabees 12:46)

Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. (Rom 14:8)

This is a free resource! For more information, visit www.acatholicmomslife.com