

The Order of Christian Funerals

The Funeral Mass

The Mass, the memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral. The funeral Mass includes the reception of the body, if this has not already occurred, the celebration of the liturgy of the word, the liturgy of the Eucharist, and the final commendation and farewell.

Place: the funeral Mass is ordinarily celebrated in the parish church (canon 1177, 1). The church is the place where the Christian life is begotten in Baptism, nourished in the Eucharist, and where the community gathers to commend one of its deceased members to the Father. With the bishop's permission, Mass may be celebrated in the home of the deceased or some other place (*Order of Christian Funerals* OCF, 155; canon 1177, 2 and 3). The funeral home is not a suitable place for the funeral Mass, because it is not a place of worship. The funeral Mass is not permitted at cemetery chapels.

Timing: Because the funeral Mass is the central celebration, it should be scheduled for a time that permits as many of the Christian community as possible to be present. The funeral liturgy traditionally has been conducted on the morning of burial. In some cases, evening may be more convenient for the family and may provide for fuller community participation. The funeral Mass may be celebrated on all days except Holy Thursday and the Easter Triduum, solemnities of obligation, and the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and the Easter season. On these days, the body may be brought to the church for a liturgy of the word at a convenient time separate from the liturgy of the day. The funeral Mass should then be offered as soon as possible, at the convenience of the family and parish personnel. (See below, "Memorial Mass/Service.")

Participation: Whenever possible, ministers should involve the family in planning the funeral Mass, recommending readings, prayers, music, and liturgical ministers. Ministers should make every effort to encourage full and active participation of the family and the entire assembly in the celebration.

Music: There should be liturgical music at all funeral Masses (*Liturgical Music Today*, 31). A few elements, sung well, should be given priority. Preference should be given to congregational singing of the acclamations, the responsorial psalm, the song of farewell at the final commendation, and appropriate entrance and communion songs. An organist or other instrumentalist, a cantor, and whenever possible, a choir should be present to assist the congregation in singing the songs, responses, and acclamations of the funeral Mass. Recorded music should not replace "live" music, nor should favorite songs of the deceased replace liturgically appropriate music. Music should reflect the themes of the selected readings or Christians' hope in the Risen Christ.

Homily: A brief homily based on the readings should always be given at the funeral Mass, but never any kind of eulogy (OCF, 141). A member or friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased before the final commendation begins, or better yet, at the beginning of the liturgy. (OCF, 197).

Christian Symbols: Through the use of various baptismal symbols (e.g. a cross or bible) the community shows the reverence due to the body, the temple of the Spirit.

Easter candle: The paschal candle reminds the faithful of Christ's undying presence among them, of his victory over sin and death, and of their share in that victory by virtue of their initiation. The Easter candle may be carried before the body in procession and/or be placed near the coffin during

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the funeral Mass. (OCF, 35) It remains lighted until the liturgy is finished and the body has been removed.

Holy Water: Blessed or holy water reminds the assembly of the saving waters of baptism. Holy water is normally used as part of the rites of reception at the church door. If it is not used at the entrance, it may be used during the final commendation; it is not used in both.

Incense: Incense is used during the funeral rites as a sign of honor to the body of the deceased, which through baptism became the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is also a sign of the community's prayers rising to the throne of God. The priest may incense the gifts and the altar, then the body of the deceased, and finally the congregation. If incense is not used during the preparation of the gifts, it may be used during the final commendation; it is not used in both.

The pall: This reminder of the baptismal garment of the deceased may be placed over the coffin by the family members, friends, or the minister during the rite of reception.

Other symbols: A symbol of the Christian life, such as the Book of the Gospels, the Bible, or a cross may be placed on or near the coffin. If one of these symbols is used it is carried in the procession and is placed on or near the coffin by a family member, friend, or the minister at the conclusion of the entrance procession. Only one such symbol should be used.

Only Christian symbols may rest on or be placed near the coffin during the funeral Mass. Any other symbols, for example, national flags or flags or insignia of associations, have no place in the funeral liturgy (OCF, 38, 132). Fresh flowers, as symbols of the resurrection, can enhance the setting of the funeral rites.

Liturgical Color: White vestments are usually worn at the funeral Mass to express Christian hope. Violet and black vestments are also permitted.

Choice of Texts: The Church attaches great importance to the reading of the word of God. In the celebration of the liturgy of the word at the funeral Mass, the biblical readings may not be replaced by non-biblical readings. There may be either one or two readings before the gospel reading. It is preferable to have a different lector for each reading. The presiding minister proclaims the readings only when there are no assisting ministers present.

Final Commendation: The Order of Christian Funerals gives a short but effective rite for the final commendation at the end of the funeral Mass or funeral service. An ample time of silence follows the invitation to prayer (OCF 172). The coffin may then be sprinkled with holy water and incensed before, during, or after the song of farewell, if not previously done. The Song of Farewell (OCF, 174) is the most important prayer of the congregation during the final commendation. Every effort should be made to facilitate the congregation's full and active participation during the song of farewell. This prayer, done well, will give the rite of final commendation its substance or fullness.

Procession to the Place of Committal: The presiding minister or deacon invites the congregation to participate in the procession. If a symbol of the Christian life has been placed on the coffin, it is removed at this time. The procession then begins: the ministers precede the coffin, the family and mourners follow. One or more of the texts given in the ritual (OCF 176) or other suitable songs may be sung as the procession leaves the church.

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Outline of the Funeral Mass (OCF, 128-203)

Introductory Rites (at the door)

- Greeting
- Sprinkling with Holy Water
- Placing of the Pall [*omitted with cremated remains*]
- Opening Song
- Entrance Procession
- Invitation to Prayer

Liturgy of the Word

- First Reading
- Responsorial Psalm
- [Second Reading]
- Gospel
- Homily
- General Intercessions

Liturgy of the Eucharist

- Eucharistic Prayer
- Lord's Prayer
- Communion
- Communion Song

Final Commendation

- Invitation to Prayer
- Signs of Farewell
- Song of Farewell
- Prayer of Commendation

Procession to the Place of Committal

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Funeral Service (Without Mass)

This liturgy may be used for various reasons: (1) when the funeral Mass is not permitted (on solemnities of obligation, on Holy Thursday and the Easter Triduum, and on the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and the Easter season); (2) when in some places or circumstances it is not possible to celebrate the funeral Mass before the committal (e.g., if a priest is not available); (3) when for pastoral reasons the presiding minister and the family judge that the funeral liturgy outside Mass is a more suitable form of celebration. [More](#)

In the funeral liturgy without Mass the community gathers to hear the message of Easter hope proclaimed in the liturgy of the word and to commend the deceased to God. As mentioned before, this liturgy may appropriately be called "the funeral service." The funeral service shares the following elements with the funeral Mass: introductory rites, liturgy of the word, the final commendation, and the procession to the place of committal. The readings are those of the Lectionary for Mass, "Masses for the Dead." The policy and guidelines given above apply here. A separate format is provided in the Order of Christian Funerals.

The funeral service is ordinarily celebrated in the parish church, but it may also be celebrated in the home of the deceased, a funeral home, chapel of rest, or cemetery chapel. If the celebration takes place in the parish church, the celebration may also include holy communion from the Sacrament reserved there.

In the choice of music for the funeral service, preference should be given to congregational singing of the acclamations, the responsorial psalm, the song of farewell at the final commendation, and appropriate entrance and communion songs. As at Mass, recorded music should not replace "live" music, nor should favorite songs of the deceased replace liturgically appropriate music.

The minister who is a priest or deacon wears an alb with stole. A cope may be used. A lay person who presides may wear an alb.

(OCF, 177-203)

Similar to the Mass above minus the Liturgy of Eucharist, with the Lord's Prayer.
