

The Order of Christian Funerals

The Rite of Committal

This rite is the final act of the faith community in caring for the body of its deceased member. By their presence at this rite the community members help the mourners face the end of one relationship with the deceased and the beginning of a new one based on prayerful remembrance, gratitude, and the hope of resurrection and reunion. The celebration, whenever possible, takes place not in a cemetery chapel but at the open grave, the place of interment, the columbarium or in the crematorium (OCF, 204).

The act of committal takes place either during the rite or at its conclusion to express the full meaning of the rite: that the grave, once a sign of despair, is now, through Christ's own death and resurrection, a sign of hope and promise (OCF, 209).

This rite has two forms, the rite of committal or the rite of committal with the final commendation. The minister follows this latter form when the final commendation does not take place during the funeral liturgy or when no funeral liturgy precedes the committal rite. (OCF, 205). (See above, on the final commendation.) A hymn or liturgical song may be used at the conclusion of the rite to affirm our hope in God's mercy and in the resurrection of the dead (OCF, 214). The rite allows for some gesture of final leave-taking; e.g., placing flowers or soil on the coffin (OCF, 210).

The minister may expand the rite for pastoral reasons; e.g., if the funeral liturgy has taken place either on a previous day or in a different community (OCF, 211). Should the final disposition of the body be delayed for some time, then there may be two celebrations of the rite of committal, one on the day of the funeral liturgy, the second on the day of the actual burial or interment. Reasons for such a delay could be weather, cremation, or a body donated to science.

In the absence of a priest or deacon, a layperson should lead those present in the rite of committal. The layperson may wear an alb.

The rite has special forms for the committal of ashes and for burial at sea (OCF, 406).

Outline of the Rite of Committal (204-233)

(At the gravesite or columbarium)

Invitation
Scripture Verse or Reading
Prayer over the Place of Committal

Committal

Intercessions
The Lord's Prayer
Concluding Prayer
Prayer over the People

CHILDREN

The second part of the Order of Christian Funerals provides rites for funerals of infants (including unbaptized infants whose parents intended to have them baptized) and young children.

The Order of Christian Funerals stresses how overwhelming the death of any infant or child can be for the family and points out that the compassionate presence of the community reflects the

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compassionate presence of Christ. It goes on to suggest that parents who have lost children of their own may have a special ministry to the newly bereaved family (OCF, 239-240).

If children attend the funeral rites, those planning the liturgy should plan with these children in mind, allowing the children when possible to exercise some of the liturgical roles. Depending on the age and number of the children attending, those planning the liturgy should use the recommended adaptations in the Directory for Masses with Children. Such adaptations include having one reading, the Gospel, and taking care that the homilist is a person who can talk with children.

If the child died before being baptized, the minister does not sprinkle the body with holy water and does not use the pall. In place of these, the Order of Christian Funerals has a brief address by the minister (OCF, 249). The funeral liturgy continues in the usual manner. Before the final commendation begins, a member or friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased child (OCF, 309).

The rite of committal has three forms, the third being a rite of final commendation of an infant. This last form is also used for a stillborn or a newborn infant who dies shortly after birth. It is a short rite of prayer with the parents in the hospital or place of birth. It may also be used at the time of the committal of the body. (OCF, 318).

MEMORIAL MASS/SERVICE

The ritual requires a tangible, visual focus. The presence of the body at the funeral Mass or service provides such a focus. When the body is not present, due to donation, cremation, prior burial, or any other reason, a picture of the deceased or some other memento may appropriately be placed near the Easter Candle, the preeminent Christian symbol of the hope of eternal life in Christ.

In general, the same norms apply as in the funeral Mass or service when the body is present. The liturgy begins in the usual way, without the rite of the reception of the body. At the final commendation the Easter Candle and picture or other memento may be incensed, if incense has not already been used. (Blessing with holy water does not seem appropriate.) Some of the texts may need to be adapted.

THE PLACE OF BURIAL

The Christian ideal, flowing from the Gospel, calls for a simple and reverential burial rite and a simple and reverential burial place.

Because the bodies of the deceased were temples of the Holy Spirit, they must be treated with reverence and respect. Cemeteries should be visible signs of that reverence and not be ostentatious.

Christian burial should be provided for all Catholics, those able to pay the prevailing rates and those who must rely on government subsidy. The very poor not entitled to subsidy should be buried without charge. In the spirit of ecumenism, Christians of other denominations, who request it, should be allowed burial in Catholic cemeteries as a testament to common belief in Christ and the resurrection.

Many churches now build their own columbarium, where cremated remains may be reverently entombed.