



LITURGICAL GUIDELINES FOR THE CELEBRATION OF FUNERALS

Prepared by the Office for Divine Worship of the Diocese of
Columbus

The following guidelines provide a summary of the ecclesial documentation concerning the Church's funeral liturgies. They are also intended to serve as an aid to clergy and others who are involved in the planning and celebration of funeral liturgies within the Diocese of Columbus.

INTRODUCTION

The Church confidently proclaims that God created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death that bound humanity... principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead and glorious ascension.

Order of Christian Funerals, 1.

In each of the Church's liturgies, Christ's Paschal Mystery is made present by the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist, men and women are initiated into this Mystery and become members of Christ's Mystical Body. In the life of a Christian, the presence of the Paschal Mystery is ever renewed and sustained through the celebration of the Church's liturgies.

At the death of a Christian, the Church gathers to offer praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of the life now returned to Him. The Church also intercedes on behalf of the deceased in the belief that death is not the end of human existence, nor does it break the bonds forged in life. Recognizing the power of Paschal Mystery, the Church asks that the deceased and all the faithful will have their sins forgiven and be raised in Christ.

In these same rites, the Church ministers to those who mourn the loss of a loved one. Through the proclamation of the saving works of Jesus Christ and the celebration of the Eucharist, the gathered community finds hope in Christ's triumph over death and calls upon the Father of mercy to receive the deceased into the kingdom of light and peace.

The following guidelines provide a summary of the ecclesial documentation concerning the Church's funeral liturgies in the Diocese of Columbus. They are also intended to serve as an aid to clergy and others who are involved in the planning and celebration of funeral liturgies within the diocese.

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide an overview of the text of the *Order of Christian Funerals* (OCF) and to remind the clergy of the importance of adhering to both the defined rituals and the policies set forth by the Diocese of Columbus.¹

¹ Protocols: 10/93, 2/96, 12/96, 9/97, 10/97, and 4/99

PART I: GENERAL

Every Catholic is entitled to the Church's ministry at the time of death unless specifically excluded by Canon Law.² As well, the Church's funeral rites may be celebrated for catechumens who are counted among the Christian faithful.

Funeral rites may also be celebrated for a child who dies before Baptism or a stillborn or miscarried child if the parents intended to have the child baptized. The *Order of Christian Funerals* includes special texts to be used at funeral liturgies in these circumstances.³

Since all the baptized share in Christ's ministry of love and service, all members of the Christian community are called to share in the ministry of consolation.⁴ Members of the parish community are to be encouraged to care for the dying, to pray for the dead, and to comfort those who are grieving. Regular catechesis through homilies, evenings of reflection, and bulletin inserts should assist parishioners to understand their role in offering assistance to mourners. As well, pastors should develop parish policies and provide appropriate resources so that the theological meaning and pastoral value of the Catholic funeral rites are clearly known by members of the parish community.

CLERGY

With regard to the Church's funeral rites, it is the specific responsibility of the clergy to be present at the side of the dying, to teach on the meaning of Christian death, to comfort the family and friends of the deceased, and to ensure that the liturgies for the deceased are integrated into the entire liturgical life of the parish.⁵

The celebration of the funeral rites is especially entrusted to priests. However, when no priest is available, a deacon may lead the funeral liturgies, apart from the funeral Mass. When a priest or deacon is not available to preside at the Vigil or Committal liturgies, a lay member of the parish staff or a parishioner who has the necessary training and skills to lead public prayer may preside at these services, utilizing the appropriate options listed in these rites.⁶

FAMILY

The *Order of Christian Funerals* recommends that family members be involved in the planning of the liturgical rites.⁷ In coordination with the parish priest, the family of the deceased and the funeral director should arrange the places and times for the Vigil, the funeral Mass, and the Committal.

It is the policy of the diocese that the pastor, or his delegate, meet with the family of the deceased to plan the rituals that will take place.⁸ The delegate may consist of another priest, a deacon, or a lay person trained to assist with such planning. Planning the liturgy should occur as soon as

² *CIC*, 1183-1185

³ *Order of Christian Funerals [OCF]*, 234-342

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9

⁵ *Ordo Exsequiarum*, 25

⁶ *OCF*, 14

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17

⁸ Cf. Prot. 10/97, 2

possible following the death. The pastor, or delegate, should explain to the family the meaning and significance of the liturgy.

The funeral Mass should normally be the central element of the funeral rites.⁹ If a family is reluctant to schedule a funeral Mass, the parish representative (*e.g.*, priest or deacon) should encourage the offering of a Mass, explaining that it is a powerful prayer for the deceased and a great comfort to the living. Whenever possible, parishes should make provision for the celebration of the funeral Mass when financial considerations on the part of the family would otherwise make this difficult.

Family and friends may be invited to take part in various ministries during the celebration of the liturgy as readers, musicians, ushers, and pallbearers unless they would find these activities too burdensome at a time of grief and loss.¹⁰

PART II: PREPARATION

It is advisable that the funeral liturgy be scheduled as soon as possible following a death. Normally, this scheduling is a coordination of the family, parish, and funeral home. The parish should make the family aware that a funeral Mass may not be celebrated on certain days in the Church's calendar.

In preparing for the funeral liturgy, the family will choose readings that speak to them as well as the life of the deceased. It is the policy of the diocese that the family is consulted in the selection of readings for both the Vigil and the funeral liturgy.¹¹ The family of the deceased is offered the privilege of naming one or two people to read the Scriptures at the Vigil and the funeral liturgy.

As a directive from the Bishop, eulogies or remembrances are **not permitted** anywhere in the funeral liturgy. These may be done at the Vigil or at the gathering of the family after the Committal.

PART III: THE VIGIL

The Vigil is a brief service consisting of one or more Scripture readings and prayers for the deceased and the mourners. This liturgy usually takes place during the calling hours at a funeral home during the days before the funeral Mass. The purpose of this service is not only to commend the deceased to God, but also to support the mourners in their hope of eternal life.

⁹ *OCF*, 154

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 15

¹¹ Cf. Prot. 10/97, 6

The Vigil usually takes the form of the *Vigil for the Deceased* as given in the *Order of Christian Funerals*.¹² This liturgy may be simplified or shortened, as circumstances dictate. Alternatively, some part of the *Office of the Dead* may be celebrated at the Vigil service, except on solemnities, the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and Easter, Ash Wednesday, Holy Week, the octave of Easter, and All Souls' Day.¹³ Additional services or prayers, including the recitation of the Rosary or other acts of piety and devotion may supplement the Vigil liturgy, but should not replace it.

The structure of the Vigil should be: Introductory Rites, Liturgy of the Word, Prayer of Intercession, and Concluding Rites. Through this Vigil, the people gathered as a community, as drawn into the presence of God.

Those who lead the Vigil should encourage the participation of those present, with due pastoral sensitivity given to those who are mourning. Printed programs may be distributed to assist in this participation. The use of music at the Vigil is encouraged and can be helpful in leading the people in prayer, particularly in the singing of an opening song and the Responsorial Psalm.¹⁴

PART IV: FUNERAL MASS

The funeral Mass (or funeral Liturgy outside Mass) is the central celebration of the Christian community on behalf of the deceased. In this liturgy:

the community gathers with 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.¹⁵

It is appropriate to refer to the Mass which is offered in the presence of the body of the deceased as either the "Funeral Mass" or the "Mass of Christian Burial." The funeral Mass should not be designated as a "Mass of the Resurrection," since this term refers specifically to the celebration of the Easter Vigil.

TIME & LOCATION

Parishes should develop clear guidelines for scheduling funerals, and this information should be shared with parishioners and local funeral directors. When developing these policies, pastors should take into account the schedule of daily parish Masses, the availability and number of priests, the scheduling of liturgies and other parish events, and the requests of those who mourn. Bearing in mind these considerations, it should be noted that it may not always be possible to schedule a funeral Mass on a day or at a time of the family's preference. Parishes that celebrate regular morning Mass, particularly a Mass for which a specific intention has been designated, **should not** celebrate a funeral Mass in lieu of, or combined with, the already scheduled daily Mass.

¹² *OCF*, 54-81

¹³ *Ibid*, 348; *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours*, 245

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 68

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 129

It is the policy of the diocese that the funeral Mass is to be celebrated in a Church, preferably in the parish to which the deceased belonged.¹⁶ However, the funeral Mass may also be celebrated at another church with the pastor's consent and when the pastor of the deceased has been notified.¹⁷ Funeral Masses are not to be celebrated on solemnities of obligation, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday, or on the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and the Easter Season.¹⁸ On these days or other occasions when the Funeral Mass may not take place, a funeral Liturgy outside Mass may be celebrated.

FUNERAL LITURGY OUTSIDE OF MASS

A funeral liturgy outside Mass is ordinarily celebrated on those days when a funeral Mass is not permitted. The funeral Liturgy outside Mass should not be substituted for the funeral Mass when the celebration of a Mass is possible unless, for pastoral reasons, the pastor and family judge this to be a more suitable form of celebration.¹⁹

A funeral liturgy outside Mass may take place at a parish church, a funeral home, the home of the deceased, or a cemetery chapel. The celebration of this liturgy should include Scriptural readings, the use of music, and, if appropriate, the participation of family and friends.

LITURGICAL OPTIONS

Presiding clergy should be familiar with the wide choices of prayers for different circumstances contained in the *Order of Christian Funerals* and carefully select the most appropriate of these texts in light of the particular circumstances of the funeral.²⁰

Family members may be invited to select scriptural texts that will be used at the funeral Mass from those listed in Part III of the *Order of Christian Funerals* or from the *Lectionary*, Volume IV, nos. 1011-1026. Non-biblical texts may never replace the scriptural readings or the Responsorial Psalm.²¹

Family members may also wish to select or request specific musical selections for the celebration of the funeral Mass. These selections should be examples of sacred music and express the Church's beliefs concerning Christ's victory over death and the hope of eternal life.

In consideration of the pastoral needs of the mourners, vestments should be chosen so as "to express Christian hope but should not be offensive to human grief or sorrow."²² In the United States, white, violet, or black vestments may be worn at the funeral and other offices and Masses for the dead.

¹⁶ Cf. Prot. 10/93

¹⁷ *CIC*, 1177

¹⁸ *OCF*, 178

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 154; 178

²⁰ *Ibid*, Part V, Chapter 20

²¹ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM]*, 57; *OCF*, 23

²² *OCF*, 39

LITURGY OF THE WORD

Readings

Depending on pastoral circumstances, there may be one or two readings before the reading of the Gospel.²³ Family members or friends of the deceased may be invited to proclaim these readings. Readers should ordinarily have prior experience as lectors and be able to proclaim the Word of God with clarity and dignity. In this way, their ministry can serve as an effective aid in bringing the wisdom and hope of God's Word to those who mourn. If there are no qualified lectors among family or friends, the readings may be proclaimed by a parish lector, a deacon, a concelebrant, or, if necessary, the celebrant.

Responsorial Psalm

The Responsorial Psalm should ordinarily be sung, if possible, with a cantor leading the congregation in the sung response. Songs or hymns may not be used in place of the Responsorial Psalm.²⁴

Homily

The homily at the funeral Mass should be based on the readings that have been proclaimed. It should be brief and "dwell on God's compassionate love and on the paschal mystery of the Lord as proclaimed in the Scripture readings."²⁵ The homily should never be in the style of a eulogy, but rather, inspire those gathered to find hope in the gift of eternal life and to assist the deceased with the help of their prayers.²⁶ Bearing in mind that he is a minister of Christ's Gospel for all, the homilist should also take into account the presence of those who may be non-Catholics or Catholics who rarely participate in the Eucharist.²⁷

Universal Prayer

The petitions of the Universal Prayer may be recited by a family member or friend of the deceased at the discretion of the celebrant. The Universal Prayer should be recited from a prepared text. The formulas provided in the *Order of Christian Funerals* may be adapted to the circumstances of a particular funeral, or other petitions may be composed.²⁸

LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

Preparation of the Gifts

During the Preparation of the Gifts, family members and friends may be invited to present the bread and wine. It is customary to perform an incensation of the gifts and the altar during the Preparation of the Gifts within the funeral Mass. The body of the deceased should not be incensed during the Preparation of the Gifts.²⁹

²³ *OCF*, 165

²⁴ *GIRM*, 61

²⁵ *OCF*, 141

²⁶ *Ibid*; *GIRM*, 382.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 385.

²⁸ *OCF*, 142.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 144.

Eucharistic Prayer

It should be noted that Eucharistic Prayers I, II, and III include an option to pray for the deceased by name. For this reason, their use is especially appropriate at funeral Masses.³⁰ In the case of a funeral Mass that is celebrated for a non-Catholic Christian, the name of the deceased should not be included in the Eucharistic Prayer.³¹

Communion Rite

Inasmuch as many who are present at a funeral Mass may not be Catholic, a celebrant may wish to offer a brief invitation to those who will receive Holy Communion in these or similar words: "At this time, we invite those Catholics who are spiritually prepared to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion."³²

FINAL COMMENDATION AND FAREWELL

At the final commendation, the members of the community entrust their loved one to the merciful embrace of God. During this rite, the body may be sprinkled with holy water, if this has not occurred at the beginning of the funeral Mass. The body may also be incensed at this time as a sign of respect for the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit.³³

The *Song of Farewell* is the climax of the rite of final commendation. In addition to the selections given in the *Order of Christian Funerals*, this song may also take the form of a responsory or hymn.

PART V: RITE OF COMMITTAL

The Rite of Committal is a gathering of the faithful at the time of the interment of the body of the deceased. This rite should normally be celebrated at the graveside or place of interment. However, it may also take place at a cemetery chapel, if necessary.³⁴

The Rite of Committal offers several optional texts which take into account whether the grave or place of interment has already been blessed, as well as situations when the final disposition of the body will take place at a later time. These texts should be chosen carefully in light of the particular circumstances of the funeral. When a funeral Mass (or Liturgy outside Mass) has not taken place prior to the interment of the body, the "Rite of Committal with Final Commendation" should be celebrated.³⁵

Military services, words of remembrance, gestures of leave-taking, and other rites and customs may either precede or follow the Rite of Committal but should remain distinct from the liturgical celebration of the rite. Such rites or customs are typically coordinated with the celebrant of the rite by the funeral director.

³⁰ *GIRM*, 365.

³¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "On Public Mass for Deceased Non-Catholic Christians," June 11, 1976.

³² Cf. *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 83-84.

³³ *OCF*, 147.

³⁴ *OCF*, 204.

³⁵ *OCF*, 205.

PART VI: CREMATION

GENERAL

It is the policy of the diocese to encourage the custom of burying the body of the deceased.³⁶ If the family of the deceased requests cremation, this policy should be discussed with them in a compassionate manner. A reasonable attempt, without insult to the family or the deceased's wishes, should be made to ensure that the request does not carry with it an intention contrary to Catholic teachings. In all cases, the wishes of the deceased to be cremated, if made known beforehand, should be respected.

Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values, which the Church affirms in those rites.³⁷

FUNERAL LITURGY IN THE PRESENCE OF THE CREMATED REMAINS

Permission is granted to all priests of the Diocese of Columbus to celebrate, without recourse to the Ordinary, ecclesiastical funeral rites with cremated remains present.³⁸ The vessel containing the remains may be carried in procession and placed on a small stand in the place of where a casket would normally be placed. Alternatively, the remains may be pre-placed in the Church.³⁹ Photographs of the deceased, memorabilia, insignia, and other remembrances are not to be placed next to the cremated remains during the funeral rites.

DISPOSITION OF THE CREMATED REMAINS

The cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect and dignity given to the human body. This includes the use of a worthy vessel to contain the ashes, the manner in which they are carried, the care and attention to the appropriate placement and transport, and the final disposition. The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium. The practice of scattering cremated remains, in any manner, or keeping the cremated remains in the home is not reverent disposition that the Church requires.⁴⁰

It is the policy of this diocese that the installation or use of cremation burial niches in parish Churches is not permitted.⁴¹

³⁶ Cf. Prot. 10/97, 10

³⁷ *OCF*, 413

³⁸ Cf. Prot. 04/99

³⁹ Cf. *OCF*, 427

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 417

⁴¹ Cf. Prot. 2/96

PART VII: ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Memorial Masses

It is a time-honored custom to celebrate a “Memorial Mass” after the burial of the deceased and at a time removed from the immediate passing, such as on the anniversary of death. Parishes should be generous in making this option available to family members and friends during the months and years following the celebration of the funeral liturgies. It should be noted that a Mass on the first anniversary of death may be celebrated on weekdays of Advent, during the Christmas Octave, on weekdays of Lent, on Obligatory Memorials, on weekdays of the Easter season, and on weekdays in Ordinary Time. A daily Mass for the Dead may also be celebrated on weekdays in Ordinary Time.⁴²

Continued Ministry

Clergy, pastoral staff, and the parish community are encouraged to provide support and consolation to the family and friends of the deceased in the months and years following the celebration of the funeral liturgies. This support can take a variety of forms, including the celebration of Memorial Masses, a parish bereavement support group, the inscription and display of a *Book of the Deceased* prior to the annual celebration of All Souls’ Day and during the month of November, and through simple expressions of presence and prayer to those who continue to grieve. In these and other ways, the faith of the Christian community in the resurrection of the dead can bring support and strength to those who suffer the loss of those whom they love while building closer ties amongst the Christian faithful.



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⁴² *GIRM*, 380; *Ceremonial of Bishops*, Appendix III.