

When Sarah died at the age of 127, Abraham performed the customary mourning rites for her (Gn 23:1-3). Every culture has its own mourning rites including the Catholic faith. Confident that death is not the end but the time for a new beginning, the Church offers a three-fold rite to help bury the dead. In my 20 years of serving as a priest, I've only been able to observe the full three-fold process a handful of times, so it is worth spending a little time to talk about death and the Funeral Rites of the Catholic Church.

The Vigil Service takes place in advance of a funeral. "It is a time to remember the life of the deceased and to commend him/her to God. In prayer we ask God to console us in our grief and give us strength to support one another." In my mother's era, this took place in the home. In some areas, a Vigil Service may take place in a funeral home. Another appropriate place is in the Church itself on the night before the funeral.

The Vigil Service is a time for reflection and prayer. It can take the form of a Service of the Word with the communal recitation of the Rosary. Given our belief in the resurrection of the dead, the Glorious Mysteries are most appropriate. Another form of prayer may be from the Office for the Dead from the Liturgy of the Hours. There is a lot of latitude in planning a Vigil Service. "It is most appropriate, when family and friends are gathered together for visitation, to offer time for recalling the life of the deceased. For this reason, eulogies are usually encouraged to be done during a Vigil Service."

Life in Rural Alaska often presents its share of challenges in regard to funerals. Visitors coming from afar may not be able to come in advance and there is often a viewing of the body just prior to the funeral. In this case, it still may be possible to offer prayers in the presence of the body and allow for a Rosary beforehand.

The Funeral Mass is the central liturgical celebration of the Christian community for the deceased. When a Catholic dies, the Church encourages the celebration of the Funeral Liturgy at a Mass. When Mass cannot be celebrated, for example when a non-Catholic spouse dies, a Funeral Liturgy outside Mass can still be celebrated at the Church or in a space large enough for the anticipated crowd of mourners.

"The Church gathers with the family and friends of the deceased to give praise and thanks to God for Christ's victory over sin and death." Although our grief is focused on the loss of a friend or loved one, we are a people of hope. Jesus reminds us: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest, says the Lord" (Mt 11:28).

Christ is the first born of the dead and his resurrection makes our own eternal life possible. We therefore have very formal rules about the focus of a funeral in the selection of readings, music, and prayers. As we gather in prayer, we commend the deceased to God's tender mercy and compassion. We seek strength in the proclamation of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. The funeral is a very structured act of worship, and not merely an expression of grief.

The third and final ritual is burial. At the conclusion of the Funeral Mass or service, the community processes from the Church or gathering place for the service at the cemetery. Funerals in villages are very good about doing this. No matter how cold or frozen the ground is, great effort is made to dig a grave so a person's body may be laid to rest in the ground directly after the funeral. In cities, often times, a winter death is followed by a long delay until late spring or early summer before the burial takes place.

Beside the open grave, the community of faith gathers to bury the person. "In committing the body to its resting place, the 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.”

Scripture is an integral part of each of the three portions of a Catholic Funeral. “Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I did not come to call the righteous but sinners” (Mt 9:12-13). Not only are the words of Sacred Scripture very comforting, but they also remind us of the efficacy of our prayer for the dead. One who is alive can always ask for the forgiveness of sins. One who has passed is most appreciative of the prayers of the community for God’s mercy.

Following the burial, there is often a gathering to eat and share more stories about the one who has passed from this life to the next. At one village funeral, I fondly recall later in the evening the community gathered for Native Dancing followed by a return trip back to the Church before midnight for Mass to celebrate the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God. Since it was New Year’s Eve, as we left the Church ... just past midnight fireworks lit up the night sky.

Source: uscgb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/bereavement-and-funerals/overview-of-catholic-funeral-rites