

# COMFORT FOR THOSE WHO MOURN and WEEP

## A Guide to Roman Catholic Funerals for Catholics and their Family Members



This brochure explains the importance and the meaning of Catholic funeral practices. The purpose of this brochure is to help you to be able to make informed decisions prior to or upon the death of a loved one.

### *Why should we celebrate the funeral?*

The Catholic Church has a long-standing tradition of accompanying the family and friends of the deceased from the time of death to the burial with the various prayers and the liturgical

rites found in the *Order of Christian Funerals (OCF)*.

### *What is the significance of the funeral?*

The Church teaches that Christ is present with us when the funeral rites are celebrated. He will console us in our grief just as he consoled Martha and Mary at the death of Lazarus as we read in the Gospel of John, chapter 11:21-36.

### *How many funeral rites are there?*

There are three: the vigil prayer service, the funeral liturgy and the committal service.

## THE VIGIL PRAYER SERVICE

### *Does the Church provide a service for use during visitation?*

Yes. The vigil prayer service provides the first opportunity for the presence and prayer of the Christian community with your family in the presence of the deceased. (OCF #54) The vigil prayer service expresses our Christian belief in the resurrection through the use of Sacred Scripture and special prayers of hope and consolation. (OCF #56)

### *Should we have a vigil prayer service?*

Yes. During the celebration of the vigil prayer service, the Church community, gathered in the name of Christ, consoles you, your family and the other mourners.

### *When may a member of the family or a friend speak about the deceased?*

The appropriate time for family members and friends to speak or show pictures on behalf of the deceased is during visitation following the vigil prayer service. This will allow for lengthier anecdotes and stories about your loved one than can be accommodated either at the vigil prayer service or the funeral liturgy. A time of remembrance may also take place during

visitation at the funeral home or at a gathering or meal following the funeral.

## THE FUNERAL LITURGY

### *What is the purpose of the funeral liturgy?*

The celebration of the funeral liturgy is intended to offer comfort and hope to you, your family and the other mourners. At the same time the funeral liturgy expresses the Christian belief in the resurrection through the ritual use of various sacred symbols.

The symbols used in the rituals of the funeral liturgy are the baptismal water, the baptismal garment (the pall), Sacred Scriptures, the light of Christ (the Easter candle), the distribution of the Body and Blood of Christ (when Mass is celebrated) and the presence of the Christian community gathered in the act of worship.

### *Should the funeral liturgy be held for a Catholic who has died?*

Yes. The funeral liturgy within Mass or outside of Mass is the most important of the three funeral rites. The funeral liturgy celebrates the life of the deceased, the Christian meaning of death and the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body.

### *What may our family do at the funeral?*

You, your family members and friends are invited to participate in several ways, such as

- placing the pall on the coffin once the body of your loved one has been brought into the church (the pall is a symbol of the white garment received at baptism);
- laying Christian symbols, such as a cross or a Bible, on the pall that covers the coffin after the procession into the church;
- presenting the gifts of bread and wine at the preparation of the gifts when Mass is celebrated.

Catholic family members or Catholic friends may also

- read the Scripture passages before the Gospel reading;
- lead the General Intercessions;
- assist the priest as a server.

*What type of music should be chosen for the funeral?*

Christian hymns, songs and acclamations are an essential part of the funeral liturgy. Secular lyrics are not permitted. (OCF #157) The melodies should be familiar or simple enough so that your family, friends and community members can easily take part. The music will console you and your family.

*Is there protocol for using flags at the funeral?*

The use of flags or insignia are subject to specific civilian, military and religious regulations. (OCF #132) Upon entering the church the flag is removed and the pall is placed over the coffin. The flag may again be draped over the coffin after it is taken from the church.

## THE COMMITTAL SERVICE

*What is the committal service?*

The tradition of Christian burial includes the practice of committing the body to its final resting place. This act of love and reverence for the body of the deceased is expressed in the Gospel of Mark 15:46: "Joseph of Arimathea... took Jesus down from the cross, wrapped him in the shroud, and laid him in a tomb. . .".



*Does the committal service have a special meaning?*

Yes. "In committing the body to its resting place, the community expresses the hope that, . . . the deceased awaits the glory of the resurrection. (OCF #206)

*Where is the committal service celebrated?*

You may celebrate the committal service at the grave, tomb, mausoleum, crematorium or at sea. (OCF #204)

*May the family participate in the committal service?*

Yes. After the rite concludes, you and your family members may make a final gesture of farewell, for example, by placing flowers or soil on the coffin or place of interment. (OCF #210)

## FAQ'S

*What should I do when a loved one is seriously ill or in danger of dying?*

You should ask the parish priest to celebrate the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, which includes Holy Communion, with your loved one. They should also continue to receive Holy Communion regularly, especially as death approaches. This is known as Viaticum.

*What should I do when death occurs?*

If you are the closest relative or the one responsible for making funeral arrangements you should contact the parish office and a funeral home prior to or immediately following the death of your loved one. The priest or his delegate may be available to come at the time of death to pray with you in the presence of the deceased or you may offer prayers for the deceased.

*Does the Catholic Church allow cremation?*

Yes. If necessary, you may choose cremation when the reasons for doing so are not contrary to Christian belief. If at all possible, cremation should be delayed until after the funeral liturgy so that the body of the deceased may be honored at the funeral.

The brochure "*The Church and Cremation*" will answer many of your questions. It is available through your parish or by contacting the Diocesan Office of Christian Worship. The address is included at the end of this guide.

*Who will schedule and prepare the funeral liturgies?*

Contact the parish office to arrange for the parish priest or his delegate and the music director to help you schedule and prepare the funeral liturgies.

## CONCLUSION

The Catholic Church continues the Christian tradition of offering consolation and hope through the celebration of these rites. You can be assured that Christ, who comforts those who mourn and weep, will comfort you, your family and friends in your time of need.

The Leader's edition of *A Guide to Catholic Funerals* and the brochure, *The Church and Cremation*, are available by contacting the Office of Christian Worship at

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