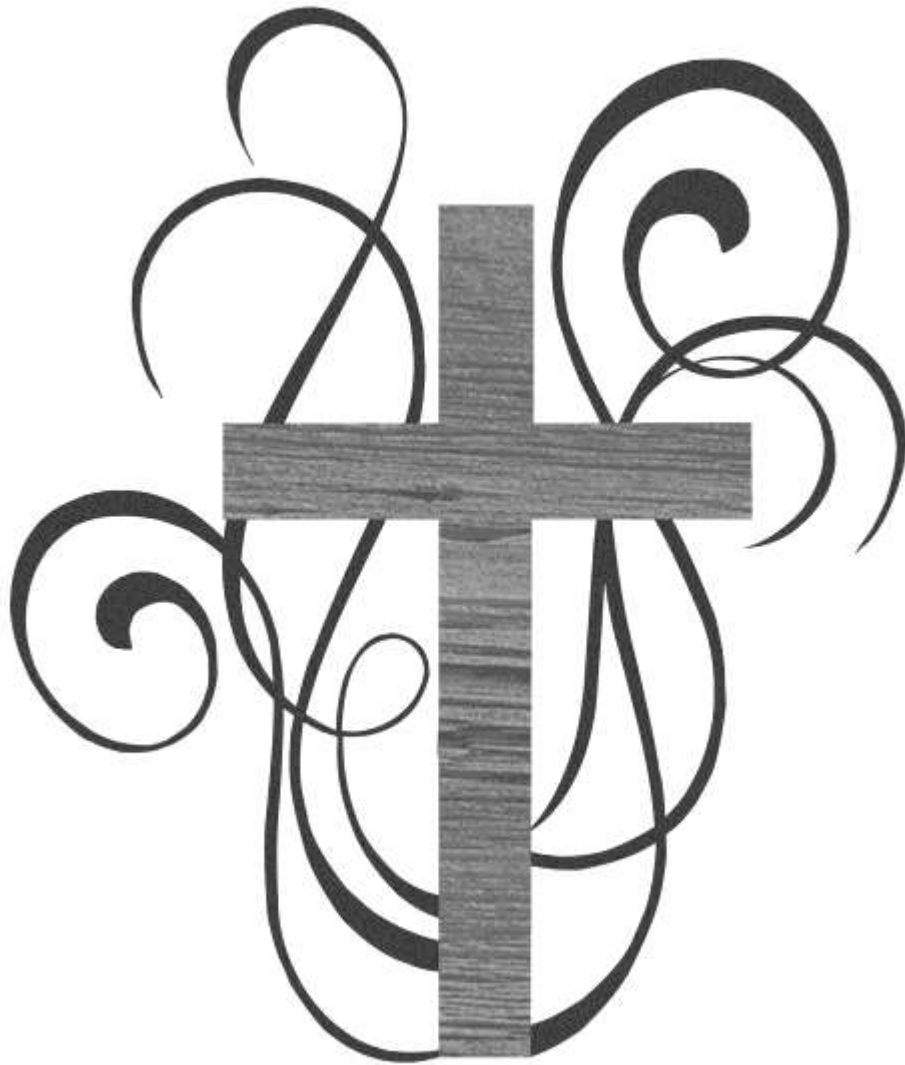


*...in Newness of Life.*



A Pastoral Letter on the Rite of Christian Burial  
Catholic Diocese of Superior

## *...in Newness of Life*

*Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4)*

### *Introduction*

Throughout human history the reality of death has prompted untold reflection, speculation and interpretation. Peoples of every era have searched to find a meaning to this one certainty which confronts every living being. The followers of Jesus are no exception in this search. *In the face of death, the church confidently proclaims that God has 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. (Order of Christian Funerals #1 – hereafter OCF)*

It is this fundamental belief that has shaped the Church's rituals surrounding the mystery of death. At the same time, these rituals have molded the faith of her members demonstrating the age old conviction that, *as the church prays, so does she believe.*

In order that these sacred rites might be well prepared and entered into with deeper awareness, the Catholic Diocese of Superior offers the following pastoral letter. This letter containing church regulations and pastoral suggestions is intended for pastors, family members of the deceased, funeral directors and all who assist in the preparation of funeral liturgies. This statement does not replace the official *General Introduction to the Order of Christian Funerals*, nor is it a substitute for a fuller reading of the liturgical texts and rubrics. Instead it provides a succinct explanation of the Catholic funeral rite and the Church's expectations of how these rites are to be celebrated in local parishes.

## *The Funeral Liturgy*

The Church's funeral liturgy has a threefold purpose which addresses three distinct but interrelated subjects: God, the deceased and the community. (OCF #5-7)

### **1. God**

... to offer God praise and thanksgiving for the gift of life which has now been returned to him

### **2. The Deceased**

...to commend the deceased to God's merciful love and to pray for the forgiveness of sin

### **3. The Community**

...to bring hope and consolation to the faithful who mourn the passing of the deceased

Furthermore, the funeral liturgy, modeled on that of a journey or rite of passage, involves three stations each of which is marked by a beautifully crafted rite that helps to unfold the Christian theology of death. At each of these three moments the mourners prayerfully accompany the body of the deceased, journeying with it from the funeral home to the parish church and finally to the cemetery.

## *Station 1 - The Funeral Home and Wake Service*

Following an ancient custom, a vigil or wake service is held on the eve of the funeral Mass. This is the time of visitation when the Christian community comes together in prayer to console and keep watch with the family members finding strength in Christ's presence. More often than not this first station of the funeral liturgy is observed in a designated funeral home. However, it may also be held in the home of the deceased, a practice that predates funeral homes, or in the parish church or a separate "wake chapel" specifically designed for such occasions.

The wake service is not simply the opportunity for family and friends to “pay their respects” and offer condolences, but is the first occasion among the funeral rites for the proclamation of God’s Word in the scriptures. For this reason, the wake service, as outlined in the *Order of Christian Funerals*, should always be celebrated. Other venerable prayer forms such as the rosary may not be substituted for this rite but may be used in addition to it at other times in the course of the vigil. The wake service is generally presided over by a priest, deacon or lay leader of prayer.

While the wake service is principally a time of formal prayer, it may also be an occasion for the public sharing of reflections on the life of the deceased in what is traditionally called the eulogy. A eulogy might take various forms, for example, the recounting of edifying stories, the sharing of memories or the recitation of the deceased’s most noble characteristics and virtues. It is in the context of the wake service, rather than the funeral Mass, that a eulogy is offered.

## *Station II - The Funeral Mass*

The funeral Mass is the central liturgical celebration of the Christian community for the deceased. *Through the Holy Spirit the community is joined together in faith as the one Body in Christ to reaffirm in sign and symbol, word and gesture that each believer, through baptism, shares in Christ’s death and resurrection and can look to the day when all the elect will be raised up and united in the kingdom of light and peace.* (OCF #129)

For this reason, unless exceptional circumstances prevail, the funeral Mass should never be omitted. In rare instances, when for example, the family members of the deceased are not Catholic or no longer practice the Catholic faith, it may be pastorally inadvisable to celebrate the Mass. In such cases the option for the “Funeral Liturgy Outside Mass” (found in the *Order of Christian Funerals*) should be celebrated.

Even if the funeral liturgy is celebrated outside the context of the Mass, this second station should nonetheless be kept at the parish church or chapel rather than the funeral home. This is to recognize the church building (itself a symbol of the baptized) and the worshipping community

that regularly gathers there as significant elements in the faith life of the deceased.

Funeral Masses are normally celebrated in the morning after the wake. In some places it is customary to celebrate the funeral Mass in the evening thereby allowing more people to attend who might otherwise be prevented from doing so due to work schedules. In these situations the wake is normally conducted in the afternoon prior to the Mass while the burial takes place either the next morning or at a later time.

It is most desirable for representatives of the family to meet beforehand with the priest and if possible the parish liturgy/music director to discuss the funeral Mass and make appropriate suggestions for scripture readings and music. Popular or secular songs, no matter how meaningful to the deceased (or the deceased's family), are inappropriate and not permitted in the funeral Mass. The same applies to recorded music which should never be substituted for the active participation of the assembly. If the family requests a pre-recorded song (sacred or secular) as part of the funeral experience, it may be played at the wake provided it is respectful of the occasion.

Non-biblical readings may not replace the scriptural texts in the funeral Mass or the wake service. Provided they are appropriate, such readings could be used elsewhere as part of the homily or as a meditation during the time of visitation.

Frequently, family members or friends of the deceased are asked to function in various liturgical roles as lectors, altar servers, communion ministers or cantors. Although their participation is both fitting and consoling, care should be taken to assure that those selected for these liturgical tasks are prepared and experienced in these ministries.

The funeral Mass itself is arranged in stations the first of which begins at the church doors where the casket is received and blessed with holy water, a symbol of baptism. In churches that have an ample gathering area the casket is then covered with the white funeral pall, another baptismal symbol reminding those present that all who are baptized are clothed with Christ. In smaller

churches where this covering cannot be done at the entrance, it may take place once the casket is brought to the front of the church. In either case family and/or friends of the deceased, rather than funeral home personnel should be invited to cover the casket in a reverent and loving manner.

After the casket is in place, the Mass continues with the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. As a symbol of honor, incense may be used at the proclamation of the Gospel and at the Preparation of the Gifts. If used at the Preparation of the Gifts, the casket may also be incensed to symbolize the link between Christ's sacrifice and the life of the deceased.

Only the elements of bread and wine are to be brought in procession at the Preparation of the Gifts. Other symbols or tokens representing the life of the deceased may not be presented at this time, nor may they be placed near the casket in the funeral liturgy. The primary Christian symbols of the white pall, Paschal Candle, or if desired, a Bible, Gospel Book or Cross, must be given a visibility that is unencumbered by personal objects of sentiment. The latter may be appropriately displayed at the funeral home during the wake service.

After the post communion prayer the Rite of Final Commendation occurs. During this farewell rite, the assembly is invited to pray momentarily in silence and then sing a hymn or acclamation which calls upon the angels and saints to lead the deceased to their heavenly home. During this song the body may be honored with incense.

After the Final Commendation, the blessing is omitted (a ritual indicator that the funeral liturgy is not yet complete) and the body is escorted from the church to the third and final station. A recessional hymn or instrumental music may accompany the procession out of the church. It is customary and fitting to toll the church bell at this time.

### *Station III – The Rite of Committal*

The Rite of Committal is the third station which concludes the funeral liturgy and is celebrated at the grave, tomb, crematorium or at sea. Often times, the finality of death is most acutely realized at this moment, making it a time of deep emotion and pain. In such instances the ritual's structure serves to sustain the mourners in their grief.

All cemeteries are hallowed ground, visible reminders of the brevity of life and places which nourish hope in the final resurrection. Furthermore, they provide geographical sites where the living may return to pray for their beloved dead as an expression of communion with them. For all of these reasons the Catholic church has traditionally assumed the care of cemeteries overseeing their upkeep and safeguarding their dignity as sacred places. Whenever possible therefore, preference should be given to Catholic cemeteries as the place for burial.

The Committal Rite is simple in structure. Its power lies less in the spoken texts, and more in the gestures of internment and leave taking. Because this rite is called a "committal" it presumes or at least recommends, the actual placing of the casket into the grave. This act of closure assists the bereaved in their process of accepting death's finality. While some may find this option difficult to orchestrate, careful planning and preparation have proven its possibility and effectiveness for the bereaved.

Other gestures such as casting handfuls of earth into the grave, the placing of flowers on the casket or similar local customs may also be tangible expressions of farewell which speak profoundly at a time when words are inadequate.

While no music is officially prescribed for the Rite of Committal it is certainly not prohibited. It may be at this moment that some familiar Catholic hymn, remembered from youth, can most effectively bring the funeral liturgy to closure. Some religious communities have the custom of concluding the cemetery rite by singing the *Salve Regina* or other Marian antiphon so that just as each day's end is entrusted to the Mother of God, so too the end of life.

## *Cremation*

In 1963 the Catholic church gave approval for her members to choose cremation provided this choice was not made for reasons contrary to the faith. Since then an increasing number of Catholics have opted for cremation for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is economic.

More recently the church has granted permission for the cremated remains (cremains) to be present at the funeral liturgy. While it is permissible to have the cremains present at the wake and funeral Mass, the church's preference is to have the cremation occur after the liturgy whenever possible. This preferred sequence not only allows for the viewing of the body by the mourners at the wake but also allows for the body's presence at the funeral Mass. This gives a fuller symbolic expression, since it was the body (not the cremains) that was washed in baptism, anointed with holy Chrism and fed with the Bread of Life.

When cremation occurs after the funeral Mass, the liturgy ends with the Rite of Final Commendation and Farewell. Sometime after the cremation, the cremains are buried or entombed in a columbarium using the Rite of Committal.

In situations where the cremation occurred before the funeral Mass, the cremains are brought to the church on the day of the funeral. The cremains may be blessed with holy water, carried in the entrance procession and then placed on a table or stand where the casket is normally located. Cremains may never be placed on the altar of sacrifice. As with the body, the cremains may be honored with incense. The rite however does not allow the option of covering the cremains with a white funeral pall.

At all times, the cremains are to be treated with the same respect given to the human body. Therefore, they should be contained in a worthy vessel and buried in a grave, mausoleum or columbarium. The practice of scattering cremains on the sea, in the air, or on the ground, as well as keeping them in the home of a relative or friend is not the reverent disposition of the body envisioned by the church. (OCF Appendix #417)



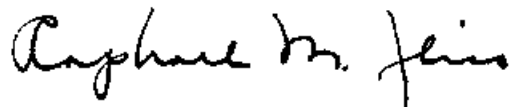
When neither the body nor the cremains can be present for the liturgical rites a Memorial Mass, rather than the Mass of Christian Burial, is celebrated.

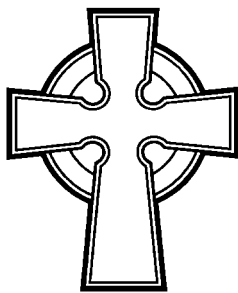
## *Conclusion*

While death may appear to be the ultimate reality which each individual must encounter alone, Christianity assures us that as members of Christ's body we live in a holy communion with those who have gone before us marked by the sign of faith as well as those who still journey toward the heavenly home. For the Christian, death becomes not an isolating event that removes individuals from loved ones, but rather, a passage that leads to a deeper relationship with humanity and the Triune God. This is the foundation of our hope and the source of our courage. This is the conviction that we solemnly express in the Catholic funeral rites.

May this pastoral letter help to deepen our appreciation of the funeral liturgy and the power it possesses. It is a power that brings comfort to those who mourn and assurance to those who remain that one day we will join our beloved dead so that "we too might live in newness of life" thanks to Christ Jesus the Lord.

Given on the second day of November, the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, in the year of our Lord 2002.

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Bishop of Superior



# Appendix

## *Appendix*

### Days when the funeral Mass is prohibited:

- Holydays of obligation
- Sundays of Advent, Lent and the Easter Season
- Holy Thursday, Easter Triduum
- On the above days it is permitted to celebrate the Funeral Liturgy Outside of Mass

### Days when the funeral Mass is permitted:

- Solemnities that are not holydays of obligation
- All Souls' Day
- Ash Wednesday
- Easter and Christmas Octaves
- Sundays of Christmas and in Ordinary Time
- Feasts
- Obligatory Memorials

- Weekdays of:
  - Advent (including December 17-24)
  - Christmas Season
  - Lent and Holy Week
  - Easter Season
  - Ordinary Time

## Those entitled to a Catholic funeral:

- All baptized members of the Catholic Faith
- Catechumens
- Children who die before baptism provided the parents intended to have them baptized
- Baptized members of non-Catholic churches provided this would not have been contrary to the will of the deceased and provided their own ministers are unavailable

\*The church's funeral rites should not be denied to a member of the Church without consulting the diocesan bishop. Such denial is to take place only in strict accord with the provisions in canon 1184