

What Every Catholic needs to know about funerals

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The funeral Mass is a final opportunity to commend the deceased to God's mercy, and that's why it must be done with reverence



The white pall placed over the casket serves as a reminder of the deceased person's baptism, as do the white vestments of the priests.

It is one of the most important events a Catholic community celebrates in a person's life, but one so often misunderstood and increasingly ignored.

The funeral Mass.

The funeral liturgy in a church setting is a final opportunity to commend the deceased to God's mercy, and to reflect on how the person's life mirrored the love and teachings of Jesus Christ, who promises that one day, the Christian will rise again and live with him in the New Jerusalem. Forever.

"In order to pray for the repose of the person's soul, and to pray for the family, the best way to do so is the Mass, because it's in the Mass that we

read from the Gospels, that we encounter the Lord Jesus and his mercy," said Father Roger Landry, a priest of the Diocese of Fall River, Mass.

"The Mass is the source of hope for those who have seen a loved one die, in that the family can see that their loved one might not die, but live forever. It's one of the greatest means by which the Christian community comes together to support a grieving family," Father Landry told Our Sunday Visitor.

Ancient rite

From the very beginnings of Christianity, borrowing from ancient Jewish burial practices, the dead were shown respect, and their bodies anointed and buried — as was Jesus' body after the crucifixion — with great care in anticipation of the final resurrection.

Writing in the third century, St. Jerome spoke of the “ancient Christian tradition” of the faithful singing hymns and psalms while the body of St. Paul the Hermit was carried to his grave. St. Augustine made references to the Eucharist being offered at the last solemn rites of his mother, St. Monica, in 387. St. Gregory of Nyssa also gave a detailed description of the funeral liturgy, complete with Eucharistic offering, of his sister, St. Macrina the Younger, in 379. “If we look at the history of how Christians treated the body; the whole custom of funerals goes back to the beginnings of Christianity. It incorporates Jewish burial practice. The expectations of a bodily resurrection led the Christians to treat the body with reverence,” said Father Richard Hilgartner, executive director of the Secretariat of Divine Worship for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. “In the early centuries of Christianity, there was a clear sense that pagan mourning practices were really considered not appropriate for the Christian, because grief and sorrow were not an end to themselves, but were to be considered transitory or temporary. The preaching at death had to deal with the promise of the resurrection,” Father Hilgartner said.

Rich in symbolism

The ancient traditions are seen today in the Catholic Church’s liturgy, where from the beginning of the funeral Mass the casket — or, increasingly, cremains — is covered with a white linen, known as the pall, which evokes the white baptismal gown. The casket is also blessed with holy water, another reminder of the person’s baptism, the day they were first given the promise of eternal life. “The connection between baptism and the funeral Mass is very strong,” Father Landry said. “Right off the bat in the funeral Mass you see how the symbolism is rooted in the Eucharist, which is a source of life, a source of strength and nourishment, but also an offering of thanksgiving,” Father Hilgartner said. “While it may not have the same joy and jubilation, even at the funeral Mass, when the community of God gathers together in sorrow, part of the consolation is in the gathering to offer praise to God and an offer of thanksgiving, being focused not just on the deceased but on Jesus.”

It is also worth noting that the priest celebrating the Mass approaches the casket wearing white vestments. “In the past, the priest wore black, symbolizing the sorrow of death. Now we use white vestments to remind ourselves of the promise the Christian received at baptism that they would rise again with the Lord,” said Msgr. Robert T. Ritchie, the rector of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City. The priest also blesses the covered casket with incense, a liturgical gesture that reminds or teaches the faithful that their prayers are rising to heaven, so that the deceased’s soul may also ascend to be with God. “The incense adds greater solemnity to a funeral. It shows that we are a sacramental people and helps us to remember God’s blessing. We’re able to unite our prayers with the prayers of Christ at the heavenly altar,” Father Landry said. After being blessed, the casket is brought to the front of the sanctuary and positioned in front of the paschal candle, which is another reminder of the light of Christ dispelling the darkness of death and promising eternal life. In some churches, a crucifix, Bible or the Gospels are placed on the casket.

Liturgical elements

Meanwhile, even before the coffin is brought into the church, the music already begins. Songs that correspond to consolation and the liturgy's focus on the Eucharist and eternal life are most appropriate, though most parishes give the family an opportunity to select hymns and sacred music that move them. Some examples of often-used songs include "Be Not Afraid," "I am the Bread of Life" and "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say."

"Many like to have the 'Ave Maria' sung where we're asking Mary to pray for our loved one at the moment of death, and for us now," Father Landry said.

"What's appropriate is what flows from the liturgy. To just pick a song because it was somebody's favorite song misses the point," Father Hilgartner added.

Though there is a central selection of about 35 suggested readings, Scripture passages can come from virtually the entire Bible. "Here in New Bedford, when fishermen die, it is not uncommon at all to have the Gospel reading of Jesus walking on the water to Peter, with the connection to the stormy waters of life on earth and how we're called by the Lord to seek permission to come to him across stormy seas to the other shore," Father Landry said.

Family members, or those designated to take care of the funeral arrangements, are encouraged to meet with the priest and parish staff ahead of time to select the music and the readings they feel best correspond to the deceased's life.

"If there is a reading that touches their heart and reminds them of the person, then it is a perfect reading for them," Msgr. Ritchie said.

"I've discovered in the last 12 years that very often the family wants to be involved in choosing the Sacred Scriptures. As a pastor, I'm very happy to give the family a reason to go through God's Word that he has given us," Father Landry said. "It's a very moving time when I walk the families through the readings. Oftentimes they cry when they're reading the Scriptures because suddenly the meaning of the words hits them. It really does open them up to exactly what Jesus is telling them through his holy word in that moment."

Eulogizing the dead

A sensitive topic that inevitably arises in Catholic funerals is that of the eulogy.

A eulogy — understood as a speech extolling the person's virtues, life and oftentimes elevating the deceased to virtual sainthood by declaring them to be in heaven — is not allowed in Catholic funerals because it does not comport with the liturgy's focus on Jesus' saving actions and praying for the repose of the soul.

"The present tension at a funeral is the desire to be hopeful and offer consolation while at the same time not presuming anything about the deceased," Father Hilgartner said.

Some pastors will allow for brief "words of remembrance" immediately after holy Communion, but many say the appropriate time and setting for reminiscing and sharing on the person's life is at the wake, not the Mass.

“A eulogy is not liturgical. The Mass should be a concentration on what God is saying about the person and the family, and offering his mercy. It’s not a time for the family to interject something before the final commendation, which I don’t think is appropriate,” said Deacon Henry Libersat of St. Mary Magdalen Parish in Altamonte Springs, Fla.

Deacon Libersat told OSV that he frequently ministers at wakes, for which the Church provides a liturgical prayer service. He said the wake is the right time and place for relatives and friends to speak and share stories of the deceased. “The wake gives the people an opportunity to reflect more socially. At one of the last wakes I went to, someone got up and had the people laughing in stitches,” he said. “There was healing there. It is very pastoral as far as I’m concerned to encourage that kind of thing.” However, the general culture’s increasing secularization is challenging the Church in how to convey the theological background and sacramentality of a funeral Mass to mourners who are more likely than ever to be estranged from the Catholic faith or atheistic in their daily lives.

“There is a wide variety of families today who are having funeral Masses. Often, they’re very faithful families where the person who died lived a life of faith and passed it to people who received it in good soil. Those, in many cases, are one of the most beautiful Masses you’ll have at a church,” Father Landry said. “In other cases, you may have children or grandchildren who are distant from the Church, and other times they can come into church with a consumerist mindset that whatever they would like to have should be the funeral.

“It’s also very hard when you see people who don’t know how to respond to the prayers, such as the Our Father. There’s a certain sadness there, but also I recognize that there is some faith that brought them there, so I try to celebrate the funeral in such a way that hopefully they’re touched and may begin to ask questions and hopefully be brought back to the faith.”

“I would hope the priests would be strengthened in their faith as they preach the resurrection,” said Father Hilgartner, who believes the priest-celebrant of a funeral Mass needs to be “a little detached” from the moment.

“I think the role of priest as celebrant isn’t necessarily about emotional contact. He’s not there to be mourner, but to offer consolation and support for the mourners. In order to maintain their function, there has to be a sense of how to maintain composure.”

Because Catholics are increasingly losing their sense of the sacramental, and the importance of even having a funeral Mass, more pastors today urge faithful Catholics to tell their loved ones, even stipulating it in their wills, to bury them with full Catholic rites.

“If young people making arrangements for their parents or grandparents, if they are being true to what their loved ones would have wanted, it’s almost a certainty that they would have wanted a funeral Mass for themselves,” Msgr. Ritchie said.

“It’s what we do as Catholics.”

Extra Notes

Proper Treatment of Cremains

Previously banned for centuries because of its connotations with ancient pagan burial customs, cremation is becoming more popular in Catholic burial rites.

The Church allowed cremations in 1963, with the understanding that the body would be cremated after the funeral Mass. The Church subsequently relaxed its rules in 1997 to allow cremains to be blessed during the funeral.

Under present canon law, cremains must receive a proper burial in consecrated ground, or be placed inside a cremain niche in a mausoleum. Scattering the ashes at sea or keeping them on a fireplace mantel are prohibited for Catholics.

“We would never keep someone’s casket in the living room, or dismember someone and scatter them out to sea from a plane. We would recoil because there would be something grotesque about that,” said Father Roger Landry, who encourages his flock at St. Anthony de Padua Church in New Bedford, Mass., to have a full-body burial.

“It’s important for us as Catholics to be countercultural in the way we are buried,” Father Landry said. “To be buried as Christ was buried is a value of great importance for the Church. A lot of times Catholics today are being infected with a pagan spirit that we are our soul, rather than a body/soul unity. The early Christians never cremated their dead, never, because that’s what the pagans did. Now it’s happening again.”

The Cremation Association of North America reported that cremations accounted for about 40 percent of deaths in 2010, and estimated that figure could increase to more than half by 2025. Reasons vary for why people seek cremation. It is less expensive than full-body burial while some people are attracted to the idea of cremation being compatible with an ecological worldview.

While the Church now allows for cremations, Father Landry is worried that its increasing popularity reveals that Catholics have lost an appreciation for the sacramental concreteness of the faith. “I try to stress to Catholics that a full-body burial is something worth paying for,” he said.

Words of Remembrance - Setting the Tone

Joking about someone’s past indiscretions or reflecting about the person’s love for peanut butter are not appropriate topics for remembering someone during a funeral Mass.

“It should be something serious, not frivolous, and not used for entertainment on the part of the people there. Funny bits are not appropriate,” said Msgr. Robert T. Ritchie, the rector of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City.

Some priests allow mourners to offer a few words of remembrance at the end of a funeral, but oftentimes with conditions.

“Many priests have basically said it’s not worth it to have words of remembrance,” Father Roger Landry of Fall River, Mass., said.

“There are family members, who for example, are given an opportunity to speak three to five minutes, but go longer than that. In other places, some pastors will review the words prior to the person giving them, to make sure they would be appropriate for the Mass. That’s what I do.”

Father Landry said he once had to tell a young woman that she could not talk about how her late grandmother accepted her lesbian lifestyle. Another person had planned to joke about the deceased’s alcoholism.

“That is obviously inappropriate to be said in Church,” Father Landry said.

Though it is an understandable sentiment, Father Richard Hilgartner of the U.S. bishops’ Secretariat of Divine Worship said pastors also have to guard against people presuming the deceased are in heaven.

“The challenge I think is that we believe when one dies there is this process of purification and of judgment. We can’t presume this person is already in heaven. Of course, we’re always praying to God to welcome this person into heaven. That’s not about being mean or judgmental, but this the reality of who we are, and this process of preparation and cleansing to meet God in heaven.”

Msgr. Ritchie said the words of remembrance should primarily focus on the person’s faith and the love he or she had for Jesus Christ.

“Sometimes, they’re wonderful and will bring tears of joy to people,” he said.

Father Landry added that he gives a brief catechesis to anyone who wishes to offer words of remembrance.

“Anything said in church must have a relationship to building people up in the faith,” he said.

Planning Ahead

Most people do not like to think about planning their funeral, which can be a stark reminder of their mortality.

But Rosemary Kazyk, the steward for pastoral care at St. Mary Magdalen parish in Altamonte Springs, Fla., encourages people to at least write down their wishes so their loved ones can know what to do.

Kazyk told Our Sunday Visitor that people — no matter their age — should plan what they want in terms of a funeral Mass, and that prearrangements be made with a funeral home.

And you should do it when you’re well, because when you’re sick, you don’t want to talk about those kind of things, she said. People looking to make funeral arrangements should also arrange a visit with their pastor or the parish lay staff that can guide the families through the process of planning the funeral liturgy. The parish will schedule the funeral Mass at the earliest and most convenient time for the family.

“I like to help people. We plan the liturgy with them. We try to make it as comforting as we can for them,” she told OSV. “Someone asked me how I can do this, but it gives me joy knowing that I’m providing comfort to families during a tough time in their lives.”

Kazyk said her parish on average holds 70 to 80 funerals a year. Whether the deceased was an elderly person who passed away after a long illness or a young person or child who died suddenly in tragic circumstances, comforting the families can be a challenging task.

It’s tough no matter what, she told OSV.