

FUNERAL GUIDELINES

Introduction – Death in the Christian Context

From the beginning of the Church, the burial of our deceased brothers and sisters in Christ has been a special part of our life of faith and prayer. Our Catholic belief sees death as the entrance into eternity, expresses a hope in the resurrection of the dead, recognizes the value of prayer for the deceased, and shows reverence for the body which remains.¹ The rites and ceremonies connected with Christian Burial therefore must clearly express and unite us to the paschal mystery of Christ's victory over sin and death.

A Response of the Christian Community

The events which surround death call for a community response.² While the immediate family bears the burden of greatest sorrow, the community of relatives, friends and parishioners comes together to provide prayerful support. The whole Christian community, through the Church, offers its thanksgiving for the life of the deceased and commends him or her to the merciful love of God.

At the time of death, there is a great need for effective, sensitive care on the part of the parish pastoral staff. The parish clergy in particular are expected to offer support and consolation and to assist families in preparing for the celebration of the funeral. They will have the obligation of conducting services for the wake, the funeral and the final disposition of the body. It is essential that the clergy exercise their responsibilities in these matters conscientiously and in keeping with the directives of the Church.³

¹ Cf. *The Code of Canon Law* (hereafter, *CIC*), 1176

² See the *Order of Christian Funerals*, nos. 8-11.

³ The revised *Order of Christian Funerals* (hereafter: *OCF*), with the adaptations prepared by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and approved by the Holy See, is now in effect. As of November 2, 1989, all funeral and burial services must comply with the directives and rites presented in this revised liturgical book. Appendix II of the *OCF*, providing prayers and directives for Cremation, was published in 1997.

Guidelines

The following guidelines are offered to assist all clergy and lay people who participate in the corporal work of mercy of burying the dead and ministering to their families. Based on the general law of the Church and its liturgical norms, these notes address some of the practical questions most frequently asked about Catholic funeral practices. They also highlight some points of pastoral practice that will be helpful to clergy, pastoral staff and funeral directors. Nonetheless, since they are so brief, the content here cannot substitute for a full and careful reading of the pastoral notes contained in the *Order of Christian Funerals*.

We recognize that these guidelines cannot provide for every eventuality. Situations will inevitably arise in which exceptional circumstances will call for flexibility, common sense, prudential judgment and pastoral charity in applying the principles on which these guidelines are based.

Priests and deacons should help their people to understand the theological considerations that are the foundation of these guidelines, especially with items about which there may be some confusion or misunderstanding. The clergy have an important pastoral responsibility to instruct and motivate their people to a greater understanding and deeper appreciation of all aspects of death and burial in the Catholic tradition. In preaching and teaching, they are to stress the spiritual and religious significance of death and burial. In addition, the meaning and importance of having the Eucharist celebrated for the deceased and of praying for them should be frequently taught to the people. The season of the year around the Commemoration of All Souls (November 2) provides a particularly appropriate time for such catechesis.

1. First steps in arranging a Funeral

- When the death of a Catholic appears to be imminent, the parish priest should be called to provide the dying person

with the appropriate Sacraments and also to give comfort to the family.

- When the person has already died, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick (“Last Rites”) is NOT given. Nonetheless, the priest should be called in order that he might pray for the deceased and minister to the bereaved family. Prayers for this purpose are found in the *Pastoral Care of the Sick*, Chapter 7: “Prayers for the Dead,” and in *OCF Part I*, Chapter 2: “Related Rites and Prayers.”
- Once the death has occurred, the family should call a funeral director to handle the preparation of the body for burial and to coordinate the other necessary legal and practical arrangements. The funeral director usually arranges the date and time of the funeral in consultation with both the family and the parish priest.
- Upon learning of the death, the parish priest or his delegate should contact the family promptly and personally to offer his condolences and help them to place their trust and confidence in the Lord.
- During this visit, the priest or his delegate will help the family arrange the details of the funeral rites, particularly family participation and the choice of scripture readings and music. He should give special attention to questions about which there may be confusion or misunderstanding, such as cremation, eulogies, fees, procedures, etc.
- Funeral and burial practices should reflect Christian simplicity rather than expensive material display.

2. The Catholic Funeral Liturgy

The Catholic funeral normally has three parts: the Vigil (the “Wake”), the Funeral Mass, and the Committal (“Burial”). These rites of the Church are one of the few truly “stational” liturgies that remain in our current practice. “Stational” means that the liturgy moves from place to place as its various

elements are celebrated.⁴ This special character is seen clearly as the funeral “moves” from the Vigil Prayers at the funeral home to the celebration of the Funeral Mass at the parish church and finally to the cemetery. This movement becomes a living icon of the Christian’s journey through this life to eternal life.

3. The Vigil Service

The Vigil Service is a brief prayer service consisting of one or more scripture readings and various prayers for the deceased and the mourners. It customarily takes place during the calling hours (“Wake”) on the day before the funeral Mass. The purpose of these prayers is not only to commend the dead to God, but also to support the Christian hope of the people and to help the mourners profess their own faith in eternal life. The Wake, therefore, gives us the opportunity both for private prayer and for a communal service in which we may join to bring the peace and consolation of Christ to the bereaved.

- The Wake Service normally takes the form of the “Vigil for the Deceased” or “Evening Prayer”⁵ contained in the *Order of Christian Funerals*. Services developed along the same pattern, the traditional recitation of the Rosary, or other acts of piety and devotion may *supplement* the rites of the ritual, but must not replace them.
- The Wake Service, according to local custom and particular circumstances, may take place either in the home of the deceased or in the funeral home. It may also be conducted in the Church at an appropriate time before the funeral if there is sufficient space for an adequate celebration which would not interfere with other liturgical celebrations or parish needs.
- Generally, the Wake Service will be held the afternoon or evening preceding the funeral. It should not immediately precede or be part of the funeral itself, lest the funeral

⁴ See *OCF* 42.

⁵ *OCF* Part IV: Office for the Dead, Chapter 18.

service be unduly lengthened and the Liturgy of the Word duplicated.

- The Wake Service may be conducted by a priest or deacon, in their absence, by a lay person. There should always be participation by those present; and, if possible, printed materials should be given out so as to assist all in joining the service.
- If desired, the Vigil gathering provides an appropriate setting for family members and friends to share remembrances of the deceased.⁶ This sharing should take place in a manner distinct from the Vigil Prayers.

4. The Importance of the Mass in the Catholic Funeral Liturgy

What makes us Catholic? The simplest answer: our sacramental life, centered in the celebration of the Eucharist each week on Sunday, the Lord's Day. From the moment of our baptism until we breathe our last, we are to make the weekly celebration of the Mass the pulse-point and rhythm of our lives. All of our daily activity leads us to Sunday Mass; the Sunday Mass sends us out into the world to live the Gospel as faithful disciples of Jesus.

The dying and rising of Jesus, celebrated and re-presented in every Mass, gives meaning to all the sufferings and dyings of our lives, great and small. This paschal mystery fills us with the hope of sharing in Jesus' triumph over every form of sin and ultimately even over death itself. It is surely fitting then, when a Catholic person dies, that our prayer for the deceased be centered in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Since the Eucharist is the primary prayer of the faithful Catholic during his or her lifetime, it is most appropriate that the Mass be celebrated as the primary part of the funeral rite. Just as the infant is brought to the parish church for baptism at the very beginning of the faith journey, so now the journey

⁶ See section 8, below.

comes full circle as the body of the deceased is brought to the parish church one last time for the celebration of the funeral Mass with its compelling reminder of baptism. Once again, we see clearly that the celebration of that funeral Mass with all its baptismal and paschal meaning is the indispensable element in our prayer for the deceased. As we experience and grieve the loss that comes with death – and at the same time continue our earthly journey – that funeral Mass gives us special comfort and renews our hope of the resurrection.

- Because of the centrality of the Eucharist in our Catholic life, the celebration of a funeral without the Mass should be a rare occurrence, and only for the most serious reasons.
- “Catechumens [...] since they are of the household of Christ [...] are entitled to Christian burial should they die before the completion of their initiation.”⁷

5. “Funeral Mass” or “Memorial Mass”?

- The term “Funeral Mass” refers to the celebration of the Mass in the presence of the body or the cremated remains of the deceased. The term “Mass of Christian Burial” may also be used.
- The term “Memorial Mass” refers to a Mass celebrated within a relatively short time after the death and burial and/or at a location at some distance from the place where the person died, e.g., in another state where the deceased once lived for a time or where there might be a large number of family members who could not attend the funeral Mass itself. The term may also be used for the Mass that is celebrated at some later time when cremation of the body takes place immediately after death.
- The term “Mass of the Resurrection” is not appropriate, since it refers specifically to the Mass that is celebrated at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night.

⁷ “National Statutes for the Catechumenate,” 7. See also *CIC* 206 and 1183.

- Just as for an adult, the funeral Mass for a child is called the “Funeral Mass” or “Mass of Christian Burial.” Even though the term “Mass of the Angels” was often found in popular usage decades ago, there is no such designation in our Catholic rituals.. Since it implies an inaccurate theology about what happens to a young child who dies (i.e., that they now somehow become “God’s little angels”), the term should not be used.
- Funeral Rites for children must use the special texts that are provided in Part II of the *OCF*. Note that special texts are provided for various situations, e.g., for a child who died before baptism.⁸

6. The Funeral Mass – Pastoral Considerations

A. Time and Place

- The Funeral Mass is usually celebrated on the morning of the burial. However, if the family so requests and the pastor deems it suitable, the Funeral Mass may be celebrated in the afternoon or evening before the burial. A late afternoon or evening service may be more convenient for the family and may provide for a greater measure of community participation. In such case, the Burial will usually take place at the family’s convenience on the next day.
- The Funeral Mass may be celebrated on all days of the year except Sundays, Holy Days of Obligation and on Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. On these days, the body may be brought to the church for the Liturgy of the Word of the Funeral Mass and for the Final Commendation at a convenient time separate from the liturgy of the day. A Mass should then be offered for the deceased as soon as possible at the convenience of the family and the parish personnel.

⁸ See also *OCF* Part V, Chapter 20.

- The parish church of the deceased is the proper place for the Funeral Mass.⁹ However, if the deceased expressed a desire to have the funeral Mass celebrated at another church, the family may certainly honor that wish.
- If, for serious reason, it is not possible to celebrate the funeral Mass within a few days following death, priests (or deacons) should celebrate appropriate elements from the *Order of Christian Funerals*, particularly the “Rite of Committal with Final Commendation” (*OCF*, Chapter 6). The clergy should assist the family in arranging for a memorial Mass to be celebrated as soon as possible thereafter.

B. Family Participation

- The most important participation asked of all who attend a funeral is to be present and attentive to the rites, to respond to the prayers and sing along with the hymns and, if able, to share in the Eucharist by receiving Holy Communion.
- Family members or others who are Catholics may exercise special roles in the Funeral Mass by helping to place the Pall on the casket at the beginning of the funeral Mass or proclaiming the Scripture readings or the General Intercessions or by presenting the bread and wine at the Preparation of the Gifts. Persons of any Christian denomination or even of another faith may always serve as pallbearers.
- Given the importance of the Word of God in the celebration of the funeral Mass (see *OCF* 22-24), any family members or friends of the deceased who are invited to proclaim the readings should be experienced Lectors in their own parishes. In order to assure that the comfort, hope and strength offered by the Word of God may be fully conveyed to those present, Lectors should be able to maintain their composure while proclaiming the readings. An occasion as important as a funeral is not the time for an

⁹ Cf. *CIC* 1177.

untrained individual to “try on” the role of Lector. If there are no qualified Lectors among the family or friends, the proclamation of the readings should be left to Lectors provided by the parish.¹⁰

C. Choice of Readings and Prayers

- Part III of the *Order of Christian Funerals* provides a wide selection of biblical readings for use during the various parts of the funeral rites.¹¹ The parish priest or his delegate can assist families who wish to help in selecting the readings. Because he bears the responsibility of preaching the homily at the funeral, the priest (or deacon) may reserve for himself the choice of certain reading(s), particularly the Gospel.
- Non-biblical readings may never substitute for the Scripture readings.
- If the family desires a non-scriptural reading to be included in the funeral services, this might be appropriately done before or after the prayers at the Wake Service, during the “Remarks of Remembrance,”¹² or before or after the prayers at the graveside. In any case, the parish clergy should be consulted about the use and choice of such a reading.
- Clergy should make full use of the choices of prayers offered in the *OCF*. Prayers for a wide range of circumstances are found in Part V, Chapter 20.

D. Choice of Music

- The purpose of the Catholic funeral is to reaffirm our faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as our singular source of comfort and hope when we are faced with death. All the elements of a Catholic funeral must support that central

¹⁰ Ordinarily, the first and second readings are not to be proclaimed by the priest-celebrant. See *OCF* 24.

¹¹ See *OCF* Chapters 13-16.

¹² See section 8, below.

focus. Indeed, all the music chosen must be able to pass the test posed by the question: “*Does this song clearly express our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus?*” Therefore, we must raise the caution that most secular music is not appropriate for use during the funeral Mass.

- This caution is in no way a judgment of the person(s) who would want to choose a favorite secular song for this occasion, nor is it a judgment on the artistic merit of the music itself. The concern here is for the suitability of a given piece to fulfill the requirements for music that is used during the funeral liturgy as specified in *OCF* 30-33. Questions about the appropriateness of a piece of music for the funeral should be directed to the parish clergy and/or the parish music director.
- As an alternate way of incorporating a favorite song of the deceased (or of family members in expressing their feelings for the deceased), such songs could be played when remembrances are shared during the time of the wake or during the after-funeral gathering.

E. Ritual Notes

- “The liturgical color chosen for funerals should express Christian hope but should not be offensive to human grief or sorrow.”¹³ In our culture, white vestments are usually worn at the Funeral Mass since this color best expresses Christian hope enlightened by the paschal mystery. The choice of violet or even black vestments, although permitted by the *OCF*, must be made with care and sensitivity to the needs and understanding of the family.
- *OCF* 133 indicates that the rite of reception of the body “usually” takes place at the entrance of the church. For pastoral reasons, such as a funeral where a great number of mourners cannot readily be accommodated in the vestibule, this rite may take place inside the church, either partway up the aisle or even at the place where the casket will stay

¹³ *OCF* 39.

during the funeral liturgy. In such cases, the priest and ministers should greet the family at the doors of the church and then lead the procession to the place where the rite of reception will take place.

- Holy Water is used at the reception of the body to remind us of the Baptism of the deceased. In order that this symbolic connection may remain primary, Holy Water should not be used again during the Mass.¹⁴
- During the Introductory Rites, the casket is covered with the white funeral pall in remembrance of the white baptismal garment. The pall is not to be placed on the casket prior to the sprinkling with Holy Water. As a symbol of “putting on Christ,” the very act of clothing the casket with the pall is a visible sign of care and reverence for the body of the deceased Christian, particularly when family members assist with this ritual task. The rich meaning of this symbolic action is greatly obscured when, for the sake of convenience, the pall is placed on the casket (with only a small portion of the casket left visible for the sprinkling) even before the priest arrives for the Introductory Rites.
- “Only Christian symbols may rest on or be placed near the coffin during the funeral liturgy. Any other symbols, for example, national flags, or flags or insignia of associations, have no place in the funeral liturgy (see no. 132).”¹⁵
- The ritual elements which constitute the remembrance of Baptism replace the Penitential Rite. Once the remembrance of Baptism and the procession into the church are completed, the Mass continues with the Opening Prayer.
- The Penitential Rite would be used only when the remembrance of Baptism has taken place at a time distinct and separate from the Funeral Mass, for example, at a

¹⁴ See *OCF* 173.

¹⁵ *OCF* 38.

“Vigil for the Deceased with Reception at the Church”¹⁶ on the night before the funeral.

- The homily is a vital and necessary part of the funeral liturgy; it must not be eulogistic in character.¹⁷ However, death is an individual experience for each person and the homily therefore should not be totally depersonalized. The homily may properly include an expression of praise and gratitude to God for the deceased person’s Christian life and the virtues he or she showed in living or in facing death
- Note that the *OCF* makes no mention of incensing the body during the Preparation of the Gifts.¹⁸ If the body is to be honored with incense, this is to be done during the Song of Farewell.¹⁹
- During the Eucharistic Prayer, the name of the deceased should be mentioned only in its proper place in the Commemoration of the Dead as provided for in Eucharistic Prayers I, II and III. The name of the deceased is *not* to be included in the Commemoration of the Saints. If the name of a Patron Saint is identical to that of the deceased, it would best to avoid confusion by omitting the name of the Patron Saint from the Commemoration of the Saints, or by phrasing the commemoration of the patron as “...N, the patron saint of this parish....”
- In the Song of Farewell, the members of the assembly unite their voices in prayer for the last time to commend the deceased to the goodness and the mercy of God. As such, this Song is the climax of the Final Commendation and should be sung by all present.²⁰
- If the burial is to take place immediately, the Mass concludes with the formula in *OCF* 176. The usual greeting, blessing and dismissal of the Mass are omitted.

¹⁶ See *OCF* 82-97.

¹⁷ See *OCF* 27.

¹⁸ See *OCF* 37 and 144.

¹⁹ See *OCF* 173.

²⁰ See *OCF* 147.

- The greeting, blessing and dismissal of the Mass are used only when cremation is to follow and/or if the burial will take place on another day or at a great distance.
- Since the *OCF* makes no mention of using Holy Water as the casket is leaving the church, such sprinkling should be discontinued.

7. The Funeral Liturgy without Mass

Despite all that was said in section 5 about the importance of the Mass in our Catholic life, situations occasionally occur in which it would be not permitted or not advisable to celebrate the Eucharist as part of the funeral liturgy. For example, there are certain days in the Church's liturgical calendar when funeral Masses are not permitted.²¹ Also, the Eucharist would not be celebrated for those persons who are not entitled to a Catholic funeral according to the law of the Church, or for those who have rejected the Church and shown no change of heart prior to death.

- When the liturgical calendar precludes the celebration of a Funeral Mass, the body (or the vessel with the cremated remains) is brought to the church and Chapter 4 of the *OCF*, "Funeral Liturgy Outside Mass," is to be used.
- *Regarding the possible denial of a funeral Mass:* In cases that are less than definitive, priests, particularly pastors, should be generous in allowing and encouraging the celebration of the funeral Mass. Since one of the main spiritual purposes of the funeral is to commend the departed to the goodness and the mercy of God, the clergy must not be harsh in judging the worthiness of the deceased to receive a Christian burial. Likewise, the death of a loved one provides an unparalleled moment for evangelization and pastoral care, especially if the family members of the deceased are not frequent churchgoers.
- Again, because our ministry to the bereaved is not meant to lead the faithful away from the Church, but to draw them

²¹ See section 6A on "Time and Place" above.

closer to God, clergy confronted with a case of possible denial of Church burial should err on the side of leniency and mercy. Should he seriously believe that the celebration of the Funeral Mass should be denied, the priest must first consult the Bishop's Office.

- In the case of those baptized Catholics for whom a Funeral Mass is not celebrated, Chapter 4 of the *OCF*, "Funeral Liturgy Outside Mass," is to be used. This service is usually conducted at the funeral home.
- If, after careful consideration, the priest or deacon judges it prudent, the body may be brought to the Church for a service without the Mass. Here again, he must see to it that the liturgical service in these cases reflects the realities of the situation.
- When the Funeral Mass is not celebrated, Masses may still be offered at other times for the repose of the soul of the deceased. Burial in a Catholic cemetery may be permitted.

Several particular situations are highlighted here for clarification:

1. As a rule, a person who has committed suicide should not be deprived of the full burial rites of the Church. The culpability of those who take their own lives is seriously questioned. The *OCF* recognizes this reality by providing special prayers for this situation.²²
2. The continued neglect of Mass and the sacraments, even when generally known, is not sufficient cause for the denial of funeral rites.
3. Those in invalid marriages who have been admitted to the sacraments are to be given the full Funeral Liturgy.
4. Those who have incurred excommunication but who have had no formal sentence of excommunication passed on them are not to be deprived of ecclesiastical burial simply because of their excommunication.

²² See *OCF* Part V, Chapter 20, numbers 44-45.

5. Invalidly married Catholics and those who have attempted marriage while bound by a previous union should not be denied burial. In the planning of funeral rites for those involved in such marriages, a distinction should be made between those who have tried to practice their faith to the fullest possible extent and those who have neglected it. In the first instance, Mass would usually be celebrated when requested by the family. In the second instance, the “Funeral Liturgy Outside Mass” might be held in the church or at the funeral home.
6. When the Catholic relative of a non-Catholic requests that a priest or deacon offer a service for a deceased non-Catholic, he may do so at the funeral home. This request frequently is made when the non-Catholic spouse of a Catholic has no church affiliation. On occasion, because of special circumstances, permission may be granted to allow the body to be brought to the church for a Funeral Mass.
7. Out of friendship for the deceased or for their families, a priest may attend the funerals of non-Catholics in their places of worship. To the degree allowed by the Diocesan Ecumenical Guidelines, they may participate actively when invited by the local clergy. For a similar reason and in accordance with the same guidelines, clergy of other faiths and communions may participate in the funerals of Catholics.

8. Remarks of Remembrance (“Eulogies”)

The *Order of Christian Funerals* rarely uses the word “eulogy,” and then only to describe what the homily should *not* be (see paragraph 141). While a “eulogy” is not a requirement of the Catholic funeral ritual, many bereaved families nonetheless have the expectation that there will be an opportunity during the funeral Mass for someone to offer some sort of “eulogy.” An opportunity for such remarks is in fact provided in *OCF* 170 (“A member or a friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased before the final commendation begins”) and should ordinarily be allowed.

In order to assure that they are in harmony with the sacred character of the Mass, the Church setting and the solemnity of the occasion, any “Remarks of Remembrance” given at funerals in the Diocese of Bridgeport are to be guided by the following parameters:

- Since the “Prayer after Communion” concludes the Communion Rite, “Remarks of Remembrance” (or any other announcements) must take place *after* the “Prayer after Communion” and before the Final Commendation.
- In a Catholic funeral, the “Remarks of Remembrance” should be seen as a way to give praise and thanks to God for the life of the deceased. In other words, the remarks should place emphasis on how God has been seen acting in the life and in the death of the deceased or how God has blessed us and the world through the life and faithful example of the deceased. Note that this focus on God’s action is what differentiates these Remarks from a “eulogy.”
- Since they are not strictly a “eulogy,” the Remarks should not simply be a listing of the accomplishments of the deceased. Even more so, care should be taken that the remarks do not become a recitation of stories about the speaker himself or herself.
- Ordinarily, there is to be only one person who offers Remarks of Remembrance at the Funeral Mass.
- As an option, if there are several people who would ask or be asked to offer such remarks, they could contribute to compose one set of Remarks together. As a possibility, all could stand near the pulpit while one or more of them reads the Remarks in the name of the group.
- As another alternative, a time could be set aside during the Vigil (“wake”) or at the after-funeral gathering for more people to share remarks individually.
- In exceptional cases (e.g., an untimely death or tragic circumstances), the pastor may permit more than one person to speak in remembrance of the deceased.

- The person chosen to offer the Remarks should be able to maintain composure while speaking. It becomes very uncomfortable for all present when grief overcomes the speaker.
- Keeping always in mind the sacred nature of the Mass and the church setting and the solemnity of the occasion, the person who offers the remarks is not permitted to share stories, use language or perform any action which is in poor taste, disrespectful of the deceased or embarrassing to anyone present for the funeral. Any questions regarding propriety should be directed to the parish priest or his delegate beforehand.
- Remarks of Remembrance are to be WRITTEN out beforehand and not given “off-the-cuff.” A copy of the remarks should be shared with the clergy-celebrant or delegate for review before the funeral. Ideally, the copy is to be ready by the time of the wake service on the day before the funeral Mass is to be celebrated.
- In all cases, the Remarks of Remembrance must not appear to be excessively long or more important than the Mass itself. Ideally the remarks should be NO LONGER THAN 5 to 7 MINUTES in duration. This is usually the equivalent of one single-spaced typewritten page.

9. Cremation

“By your own three days in the tomb, you hallowed the graves of all who believe in you, and so made the grave a sign of hope that promises resurrection even as it claims our mortal bodies. Grant that our brothers and sisters may sleep here in peace until you awaken them to glory...”²³

These beautiful words, taken from one of the prayers of blessing over the grave, give us some valuable insights as we seek to understand the practice of cremation within the context of a Catholic funeral. All who sleep in Christ await the day of resurrection when our bodies will be remade according to the

²³ *Order of Christian Funerals*, 218A

pattern of his own glorified body. Thus, our mortal remains are always to be treated with utmost reverence and care as we await that day.

A. Context

- The burial of the Lord's own body in the earth is the primary model for the disposition of the body of the deceased Christian. Our Catholic funeral tradition presumes that the body of the deceased Christian, washed clean in baptism and anointed with the oil of salvation, will be reverently buried in imitation of the Lord Jesus.
- While circumstances might make cremation seem a convenient or even a necessary option, this practice is always properly considered as one way of *preparing* the body for burial,²⁴ and *not as a substitute for* burial.
- When cremation has been chosen, the Funeral Mass should be celebrated in the usual way, with the body present, if possible, and cremation to follow.
- If the body of the deceased cannot be brought to the church prior to its cremation, the Funeral Mass can still be celebrated in presence of the cremated remains, according to the norms in Appendix II of the *Order of Christian Funerals*.
- Out of reverence for the body of the deceased, the cremated remains of the body, once a temple of the Holy Spirit, are to be kept intact in their own sealed container. They may never be scattered over land or sea, much less divided into separate containers.
- Reverence for the cremated remains also demands that the sealed container be buried in the ground or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium, and never kept in one's home.
- Even if delayed by some days or even weeks after the funeral Mass, the burial of the cremated remains should

²⁴ Any reference to the burial of cremated remains includes both burial in the ground and entombment in a mausoleum or columbarium.

always take place using the appropriate ritual prescribed by the Church.

B. Ritual Notes

- *OCF* 133 indicates that the rite of reception “usually” takes place at the entrance of the church. For pastoral reasons, such as a funeral where a great number of mourners cannot readily be accommodated in the vestibule, this rite may take place inside the church, either partway up the aisle or even at the place where the vessel with the remains will stay during the funeral liturgy. In such cases, the priest and ministers should greet the family at the doors of the church and then lead the procession to the place where the rite of reception will take place.
- Holy Water is used at the reception of the cremated remains to remind us of the Baptism of the deceased. In order that this symbolic connection may remain primary, Holy Water should not be used again during the Mass.²⁵
- During the Mass, the vessel holding the cremated remains is NOT covered with a pall, nor are any Christian symbols placed upon it. Upon arriving at the place where the vessel to remain during the Mass, the one carrying it places it upon a small table which has been prepared for this purpose. *Under no circumstances is the vessel containing the cremated remains to be placed on the altar.*
- After the sprinkling of the vessel containing the cremated remains, the Mass continues with the Opening Prayer. The Penitential Rite is not used.
- Note that the *OCF* makes no mention of incensing the body during the Preparation of the Gifts.²⁶ If the cremated remains are to be honored with incense, this should be done during the Song of Farewell.²⁷

²⁵ See *OCF* 173.

²⁶ See *OCF* 37 and 144.

²⁷ See *OCF* 173.

- In the Song of Farewell, the members of the assembly unite their voices in prayer for the last time to commend the deceased to the goodness and the mercy of God. As such, this Song is the climax of the Final Commendation and should be sung by all present.²⁸
- If the burial is to take place immediately, the Mass concludes with the formula in *OCF* 176. The usual greeting, blessing and dismissal of the Mass are omitted.
- The greeting, blessing and dismissal of the Mass are used only when the burial of the cremated remains will take place on another day or at a great distance.

10. Funeral Offerings

- In the Diocese of Bridgeport there is to be no charge for the priest's or deacon's ministry in connection with the Funeral Mass or any other funeral prayer service. It is the responsibility of the parish to bury the dead and commend them to the loving mercy of Almighty God.
- Since there is never to be any fee charged for the celebration of the funeral Mass itself, financial considerations alone should never lead a family to omit the Eucharist from the funeral plans.
- This norm refers to only the "stipend" or "offering" for the Mass, and not to any fees that are customarily charged for organists, soloists or other musicians, who earn their livelihood through their music. Nonetheless, when a family has limited financial resources, pastors should do whatever possible to provide at least basic music for the funeral Mass. Pastoral musicians are likewise encouraged in their charity to extend whatever consideration they can to families in such need.

²⁸ See *OCF* 147.

- There is to be no distinction as to the type of funeral that is offered; all are entitled to the same funeral with music, etc.²⁹
- Under no circumstances may funeral directors accept Mass stipends for Masses for the dead. Only the parish priest, who accepts the obligation to celebrate the Mass, may accept Mass intentions and issue Mass cards.
- Catholic cemeteries are non-profit charitable institutions. They make every effort to keep their charges reasonable and within reach of the varied financial means of the Catholic people they are meant to serve. Inability to meet the cost of burial is never to be a deterrent to burial in a Catholic cemetery. In the face of financial hardship and absence of sources of public or other funds, the parish priest should initiate with the cemetery action for a charity burial.

After the Funeral:

“To comfort one another with assurances of faith”

“Merciful Lord, turn toward us and listen to our prayers: open the gates of paradise to your servants and help us who remain to comfort one another with assurances of faith, until we all meet in Christ and are with you and with our brothers and sisters forever. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.”³⁰

Once the funeral rituals have been celebrated, daily life quickly returns to normal – for most everyone except the bereaved family. For them, the days of the death, the wake, the funeral and its associated gatherings likely have passed by in a dizzying whirl of unfamiliar tasks, sights, sounds and intense emotions, especially if the death came unexpectedly. The days following, in stark contrast, often seem empty and confusing for the newly-bereaved – much like the first Holy Saturday must have been. They must now face the great “what next?” – the lingering and unanswered questions, the conflicting emotions and still more unforeseen legal and

²⁹ Cf. *CIC* 1181.

³⁰ See *OCF* 202A.

practical tasks in the aftermath of the death. They must adjust to a new way of day-to-day living in the absence of one who used to be an intimate and necessary part of that life. During this time of transition, their faith and their faith-community must continue to be sources of strength and comfort on which they can rely.

The parish clergy and pastoral staff certainly have clear-cut responsibilities and tasks for the preparation and the celebration of the funeral rites; not so afterward. Since our funeral rituals do not provide for anything beyond the committal, it is easy for us to get back to routine as well, moving on to the next person or family in need while the newly-bereaved family fades from our immediate awareness.

And so we conclude where we began, as we recall that “the responsibility for the ministry of consolation rests with the believing community, which heeds the words and example of the Lord Jesus: ‘Blessed are they who mourn; they shall be consoled’ (Matthew 5:3).”³¹

This brief postscript to our Funeral Guidelines is meant to encourage the clergy, the pastoral staff and the members of our parishes not to forget the bereaved in the weeks and months following the loss of their loved ones. Some very simple gestures can provide a ministry of immeasurable support and consolation:

- A telephone call or a brief written note to assure the bereaved of your continuing awareness of their sorrow and your continuing prayer for them and their beloved departed.
- A monthly Mass on the parish calendar to pray for all who have died in that past month and perhaps a coffee hour afterward for their families to visit with one another.
- An occasional prayer service and potluck supper or other such gathering to bring together in prayer and fellowship those who mourn.

³¹ *OCF* 9; see also 9-13.

- An annual “Bereavement Mass” near the Commemoration of All Souls to remember those who have died in the past year.
- A “Book of the Dead,” in which the names of the deceased are inscribed at the time of the death or funeral and placed in a prominent place in the church. This book could also be displayed during the month of November for all in the parish to inscribe the names of loved ones who have died.

Above all else, these simple expressions of our awareness and care can help to extend the presence and the peace of the Risen Savior to those who mourn.

“May the love of God and the peace of the Lord Jesus Christ bless and console us and gently wipe every tear from our eyes: in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen”³²

³² See *OCF* 81B.