



Guidelines for Funerals in the Catholic Church

Guidelines for Parishes, Ethnic Communities, and Funeral Directors

1. Introduction

The Order of Christian Funerals was published in 1969 and revised in 1989 as part of the renewal of Catholic worship following the Second Vatican Council.

There is a further renewal of the Order of Christian Funerals now taking place following the revision and new translation of the Roman Missal into English in 2012. Therefore, these guidelines will undergo a further and fuller revision when the new Order is published.

The Order of Christian Funerals includes various rites for adults and a separate one for children. Both follow the same rites, but are adapted to the very different needs experienced at the death of adults and of children.

The dynamic aspect of the funeral rites seek to move us along a pathway from intimate grief, expressed at the rites before the funeral Mass or Service, to hope in the resurrection. This dynamic is to be considered and honoured as we choose what to do and at what stage in the ceremonies. Our understanding of the process of grief underpins the rites and can lead us to discern what to do and when to do it with the resources the church and culture offers.

2. The Spirit of the Funeral Rites

“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 bond humanity” (Order of Christian Funerals, paragraph 1)

The Funeral Rites of the Catholic Church are infused with great hope in the mercy of God, and that mercy given to the deceased is the source of comfort for those who mourn.

“Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has been returned to God, the author of life and the hope of the just” (Order of Christian Funerals, paragraph 5).



3. The Progressive Rites of the Funeral Liturgy

The various elements of the Funeral Liturgy flow in harmonious progress from the time of death through to the burial or cremation of the deceased.

“The Mass, the memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral” (*Order of Christian Funerals, paragraph 5*). The other rites prepare those mourning for the celebration of the Funeral Eucharist and bring them to a conclusion. Each of the rites touches and gives expression to the grief of family and friends, while keeping faithful to the words of Jesus, *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God and trust in me.* (Gospel according to John 14:1).

Not every Catholic chooses to celebrate all these rites, many of which can be led by a family member, or a designated person from the parish or ethnic community.

There is in the various Rites a progression from the intense grief felt at the time of death through to one of increasing faith and hope in eternal life, and the comfort which Christ offers to those mourning, especially through the Funeral Mass. The liturgy helps those mourning to trust and hope in the mercy of God.

The rites are:

a) Prayers for the Dead.

These are offered immediately after death by those present.

b) Gathering in the Presence of the Body.

This is appropriate when the family is first able to gather around the body, following the death. This simple rite is also suitable when a family gathers at the Funeral Parlour for a viewing of the body.

c) Transfer of the Body to the Church.

This simple ritual is appropriate when the family accompanies the body from the Funeral Parlour or from the family home to the church or cemetery.

d) Vigil for the Deceased.

This is a longer service, which would be held in the church or funeral parlour. It might in some circumstances be good to celebrate this rite simply in the home.

It includes:

- readings from the Sacred Scriptures, prayers of intercession for the deceased and the mourners
- appropriate prayers and rituals of devotion, like the Rosary, or those belonging to various cultures.
- time for members of the family and friends to share their reflections on the life of the deceased person.



e) The celebration of the Eucharist

The Funeral Mass stands at the heart of the Order of Christian Funerals and every effort should be made to ensure that it is offered with dignity, simplicity and reverence. It is celebrated in a Church or Chapel, never in a Funeral Home or a Crematorium.

The family is usually involved in the selection of the Sacred Scripture readings, the Presidential (priest's) Prayers and other prayers, including the Universal Prayer (Intercessions). Many parishes have a Bereavement Support group which helps with this. The family and the friends of the deceased and parishioners have the opportunity to minister to the community by proclaiming the readings, reading the petitions of the Universal Prayer, bringing the gifts of bread and wine to the altar, and ministering the Chalice at Communion.

Singing and music is strongly recommended for the Funeral Mass so that the truth of the resurrection of Jesus and the eternal life of the deceased is enriched.

Other elements, like the Tribute (Eulogy) and the use of flowers, should not distract from the purpose of the Funeral Mass. "The celebration of the Christian funeral brings hope and consolation to the living. While proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and witnessing to Christian hope in the resurrection, the funeral rites also recall to all who take part in them God's mercy and judgement and meet the human need to turn always to God in times of crisis" (Order of Christian Funerals , paragraph 7).

The Rosary is not prayed before the Funeral Mass, as the emphasis must be placed on the offering of the Sacrifice of Christ, the power of his word to comfort, and the grace of his mercy offered to the deceased. If praying the Rosary is a family or ethnic custom this is best prayed at the Vigil or when viewing the body in the funeral parlour or when the family gather at home.

f) The Commendation

The offering of prayers at the coffin, its blessing and incensing, takes place at the conclusion of the Mass. From there the body is taken to the cemetery for burial or cremation. Before the Commendation, "**A member or a friend of the family may speak words of remembrance of the deceased before the final commendation begins**" (Order of Christian Funerals – Funeral Mass, article 170). However, this should not be of excessive length (e.g no more than 10 minutes) lest the principal Rite of a Catholic Funeral, the Eucharist, loses its meaning.

g) The Rite of Committal

This short service takes place at the graveside or in the chapel of the crematorium. It is permissible for Catholics to be cremated, although the tradition of the Church has favoured burial.



h) Funeral Liturgy without the Eucharist

Though the norm for a Catholic Funeral is the Mass, for a variety of reasons a family may decide not to have a Funeral Mass for the deceased and have a Rite of Commendation which would include readings from the Sacred Scriptures. Such a liturgy does not include the distribution of Holy Communion.

This may be

- Liturgy in the church followed by the Committal at the graveside or the crematorium chapel.
- A liturgy celebrated in the chapel of the Funeral Home followed by the Committal at the graveside or the crematorium chapel.
- A liturgy celebrated in the church or the chapel of the Funeral Home or the chapel of the Cemetery, which would include the Liturgy of the Word, Commendation and Committal.

The role of the Clergy is to be considered before such a decision is made; the family needs to have the opportunity to discuss these matters with the priest or deacon who is to lead the funeral rites. These matters should not be rushed. The family has the right to carefully consider the way in which the liturgy will assist them in their grief, and the call to commend the departed to God with hope and trust.

Sometimes, for a variety of sound pastoral reasons, the family may choose to celebrate the Funeral Mass, the Commendation and the Committal in the church without going to the cemetery. This request is made more often when the body is to be cremated rather than buried and the committal at a Columbarium or Memorial Garden takes place later.

Depending on the number of people attending and the facilities at the church, the Committal may take place at the hearse with the family and friends gathered around.

4. A Church of Diversity

The Order of Christian Funerals belongs to the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church, to which the vast majority of Catholics of the Archdiocese of Adelaide belong. There are other Rites of the Catholic Church, in communion with the Bishop of Rome who celebrate funerals with very different liturgies.

Those other Rites in Adelaide are

- The Ukrainian Catholic Rite
- The Maronite Rite
- The Melkite Rite
- The Syro-Malabar Rite
- The Syro-Malankara Rite



Respect and sensitivity to the people of these Rites must always be given. Their liturgies can be quite different from those celebrated by the majority of Catholics in the Archdiocese of Adelaide. Funeral Directors and their staff must be respectful of these differences.

The Archdiocese of Adelaide embraces Catholics of the Roman Rite who come from many nations, each with their own religious traditions. Respect must be paid to these traditions, but always in harmony with the Liturgy of the Church as outlined in the section, Progressive Rites of the Funeral Liturgy. At all times it is very important to keep in mind the integrity of the Eucharist, and the central place which the Funeral Mass has in our Catholic tradition.

Preparation for the funeral liturgies of a family member require cooperation between the family members responsible for the funeral arrangements, the funeral director, the priest, parish staff and pastoral leaders, and parish support teams.

5. Key Personnel

a) The Funeral Director

The Funeral Director is usually the first person the family contact after there has been a death.

The Director, meeting with the family

- Assists them and, if appropriate, the executor at the time of death, in coordinating the funeral, sometimes according to the expressed wishes of the deceased.
- Coordinate the key people - the priest of the parish of the deceased or the ethnic community chaplain and the cemetery staff, the parish secretary for the availability of the church, and in some cases, the organist and singer.
- Organises the time sequence - of family viewing of the body, the Vigil, the Funeral Mass and the burial or cremation.
- Placing the Notices in the newspaper, printing of Memorial Cards if required.
- Attending to the legal matters associated with arranging a funeral, including the transfer of the body from the home or hospital to the Funeral Home.

b) The Parish Priest, Ethnic Chaplain or Celebrant

The liturgical rites of the Funeral are the responsibility of the Parish Priest of the deceased or ethnic community chaplain, another priest of the Parish, or one known to the family. In the case of a funeral service outside of Mass, a Deacon may lead it, as well as the Rite of Committal.

No times for the funeral should be set until it is known if the parish priest, ethnic chaplain or his delegate is available. Early communication by the Funeral Director with the priest is essential.



The Parish Priest of the deceased, the ethnic chaplain, or their representatives e.g. the bereavement group, has the responsibility of

- Meeting with the family to bring the sympathy and prayers of the parish community to them, and assisting them in planning the liturgical services. Others in the parish team or bereavement group may share these responsibilities.
- Presiding at the Funeral Mass or assisting in arranging for another priest if it is not possible for him to preside.
- Coordinating other ministers in the parish to assist – the Deacon, the Pastoral Associate, the Parish Secretary, the Bereavement Group – as is appropriate and necessary.
- Ensuring ongoing pastoral support during the time following a bereavement.

c) The Family

“In planning and carrying out the funeral rites the parish priest and other ministers should keep in mind the life of the deceased and the circumstances of death. They should also take into consideration the spiritual and emotional needs of the family and friends of the deceased and their sense of loss, to accept the reality of death, and to comfort one another” (Order of Christian Funerals, paragraph 16).

Families can be very vulnerable at the time of the death of a member. Not only do they have to cope with grief, more so if the death has been sudden and unexpected, or in tragic circumstances, they must make many decisions within a short time, especially related to funeral arrangements and costs. Those assisting the family must show great sensitivity to the members of the members family at this time. Their involvement in planning the liturgy and its celebration needs to be thoughtful, kind and considerate.

Where not all members of the family are Catholic but are from other Christian Churches and Communities, other faiths and of no faith, care must be taken to ensure that the Liturgy draws people together in hope, and is not an occasion to alienate or offend people. (see Order of Christian Funerals, paragraph 13)

d) The Parish Community

“Members of the community should console the mourners with words of faith and support and with acts of kindness, for example, assisting them with some of the routine tasks of daily living” (Order of Christian Funerals, paragraph 10).

Parishes are strongly encouraged to develop a Bereavement Group, or a network of pastoral response whereby the family can feel strong pastoral support from the parish.



e) *Ministers in the Liturgy*

Consideration is given to appropriate people to proclaim the word of God, to offer the Intercessions, to carry the symbols, to bring with bread and wine to the altar, to deliver the words of remembrance, and to minister the chalice at Communion. Each ministry should be carried out with dignity.

6. Pastoral Considerations

Louis Marie Chauvet, a French liturgist, says that everything people want in rituals can be included, but each element *has its right place*. So, in planning the funeral liturgies, it is appropriate to think of this principle and to carefully consider the following matters:

- When and where the liturgies are to be celebrated.
- The use of music and religious song, while strongly recommended, needs to be appropriate to the congregation likely to attend. The Liturgy is essentially a service of prayer and praise and so secular songs are not to be included in the celebration of the Eucharist. If congregational singing is not possible, then the use of music (with a singer) is still recommended.
- The provision for the placing of symbols of the person's faith on or near the coffin especially,

The Pall – a white cloth symbolising the baptismal robe;
we are baptised as children of light.

The Paschal Candle – this stands at the foot of the coffin as a light in the darkness of grief;
a family member might light this at the placing of symbols.

A Cross, which in Australia is usually attached to the coffin itself.

The Scriptures

Religious items belonging to the deceased – their Rosary, Prayer Book etc.

Many cultures have a tradition of having a photograph of the deceased in the church. The appropriate place should be at the entrance of the church or on a table near the coffin, but not on it. If secular items are also to be used, they are placed, near, but never on the coffin.

- The words of Remembrance (tribute or eulogy) and who will deliver them. These words should be respectful and dignified. The recommended length of such words during the Funeral Mass is no longer than 10 minutes. At the Vigil a longer time can be given to the remembrance of the person. The time for the tribute or eulogy at the Funeral Mass is immediately before the Commendation.
- The use of a PowerPoint reflection on the life of the person is appropriate at the Vigil or at the family gathering following the funeral. However, at the Funeral Mass, a short presentation (3 minutes) may take place at the conclusion of the tribute or eulogy.



- The receiving of condolences which is common in some cultures by the immediate family, may take place at the Vigil, at the graveside or in the crematorium chapel. Consideration should be paid to the frailty of senior members of the family and the burden it may place on them as well as the undue length of time it may take.
- Some Funeral Directors provide a memorial candle for the family. This is not part of the Catholic ritual, because the most important candle is the Easter Candle, placed near the coffin as a reminder that Christ is our light. If a memorial candle is used, it is appropriate to place it next to the photograph of the deceased, and should not be placed on the coffin.
- The Funeral Mass must be celebrated in a Catholic Church or Catholic Chapel. Mass is not permitted in the Funeral Parlour Chapel or Crematorium Chapel or at a Mausoleum. In rural areas, where there is no Catholic Church, or one large enough, it is permissible to celebrate a Catholic Funeral, including the Mass, in another Christian Church.
- The Month Mind Mass (or its equivalent in various cultures) and Anniversary Masses cannot be celebrated as 'private Masses' for a family during the time of Sunday observance Masses (from 6pm Saturday up to and including Sunday night). The deceased can be commemorated during the Eucharistic Prayer and in the Universal Prayer (Intercessions) during Sunday observance Masses.

7. In brief

- a) The Celebration of the Funeral Mass is central to the Catholic Order of Funerals and is the norm.
- b) A Vigil or Prayers in the Presence of the Body (at the time of viewing) is strongly recommended to express intimate grief
- c) Catholics may be buried or cremated.
- d) The time and place of a funeral cannot be advertised without confirmation of the availability of a priest or deacon.
- e) The Rosary, which is a private prayer, can be prayed at the Vigil or at the time of viewing, or by the family in the home. Because of the nature of the Sacrifice of the Mass and its central place in the Rite of Christian Funerals in the Catholic Church, the Rosary is not prayed immediately before the Funeral Mass.
- f) The Funeral Mass is celebrated in a Catholic Church or Chapel and cannot be celebrated in the chapel of a Funeral Home, Crematorium or Mausoleum.
- g) In the Funeral Mass, only sacred hymns can be used, not secular songs. There are other appropriate times for such music.
- h) The tribute or eulogy takes place immediately before the Commendation.



- i) The Tribute or eulogy should be no more than 10 minutes.
- j) Powerpoint presentation, if used, is more appropriate for the Vigil or the family gathering following the funeral. For pastoral reasons it may be following the tribute or eulogy before the Commendation. If it is immediately before the Commendation it should not exceed 3 minutes. A longer version is best suited to the gathering following the funeral rites.
- k) The Committal, for pastoral reasons, may take place in the church or at the hearse immediately after the Mass of Commendation.
- l) A Funeral Liturgy, with the word of God, (in place of a Funeral Mass) may be held in the Church, the Funeral Parlour chapel, the cemetery chapel or at the graveside.

Resources

Printing a pew sheet of the Order of the Mass or Service.

The Community Life and Worship team of the Archdiocese has two templates for the Funeral Mass and Funeral Service that can be used by the family, parish or Funeral Director or whoever takes responsibility for preparing the booklet if it is desired Visit the website: www.ofw-adelaide.org.au/liturgical-templates