

*COMFORT FOR  
THOSE WHO  
MOURN and WEEP*

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

Leader's Edition

*For*

**Priests, Deacons, Parish and  
Funeral Home Personnel**

**The Diocese of Kalamazoo, Michigan**

*COMFORT FOR  
THOSE WHO  
MOURN and WEEP*

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

**Leader's Edition**

*for*

**Priests, Deacons, Parish and Funeral Home Personnel**

The Leader's Edition of *A Guide to Roman Catholic Funerals* explains the importance and the meaning of Catholic funeral practices and answers some of the frequently asked questions concerning Catholic funerals.

The purpose of the *Guide* is to assist parish and funeral home personnel to equip people to be able to make informed decisions regarding funeral arrangements prior to their own death or prior to or upon the death of a loved one.

A condensed brochure version of *A Guide to Catholic Funerals* is available to give to parishioners and their family members to assist you in this endeavor. The brochure is available from the Diocesan Office of Christian Worship. Contact information is provided at the end of this booklet.

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

The Catholic Church has a long-standing tradition of accompanying the family and friends of the deceased from the time of death to the burial with the various prayers and liturgical rites found in the *Order of Christian Funerals (OCF)*.

These prayers and liturgical rites are celebrated in order to help us experience God's loving comfort and the compassion of the Christian community. In addition, these funeral rites are a means to ritualize the reality of death in a healthy way.

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

When the funeral rites of the Church are celebrated, Christ is present in a real, yet mysterious way, to console us in our grief just as he consoled Martha and Mary at the death of Lazarus as told in the Gospel of John, chapter 11 verses 21-36.

Christ is present in the sacrament of the Eucharist, in His word proclaimed through Sacred Scripture, in the community gathered in prayer and in the person of the priest.

The funeral rites provide us with many readings from Scripture that speak of Christ's victory over death and reveal his compassion for those who mourn and weep.

It is through the act of worship accomplished in these rites that the Holy Spirit helps us to enter into the death and resurrection of Jesus, that is, into his Paschal Mystery. United with him in mystery we move beyond death to new life in Christ. (*OCF #129 and Catechism of the Catholic Church, CCC, #'s 1680-1690*)

### **How many funeral rites does the Church have?**

There are three major rites: the vigil prayer service, the funeral liturgy within or outside of Mass and the committal service.

### **Who will schedule and prepare the funeral rites?**

A member of the family of the deceased is to contact the parish office and arrange for the priest or his delegate and the music director to help the family schedule and prepare the three funeral rites. (*OCF #17*)

## **THE VIGIL SERVICE**

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

Yes. The vigil prayer service provides the first opportunity for both the presence and prayer of the Christian community with the family of the deceased. (*OCF #54*)

The Vigil Service expresses our Christian belief in the resurrection through the use of Scripture readings and special prayers of hope and consolation. (*OCF #56*)

### **Should there be a vigil service?**

Yes. During the celebration of the vigil prayer service the Church community, gathered in the name of Christ, offers consolation to the family and friends of the deceased.

### **Where does the visitation take place?**

The usual place of visitation is the funeral home. For special reasons exceptions may be made for visitation to be held in the home or parish church of the deceased if adequate space is available. Permission of the Pastor is needed for visitation to be held in the church.

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

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

A time of remembrance may also take place during visitation at the funeral home or at a gathering or meal following the funeral liturgy.

## **THE FUNERAL LITURGY**

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

The celebration of the funeral liturgy of the Church is intended to console the family and the other mourners. At the same time the funeral liturgy expresses the Christian belief in the resurrection through the ritual use of various sacred symbols.

The symbols used in the rituals of the funeral liturgy are the baptismal water, the baptismal garment (the pall), proclamation of Scripture, the light of Christ (the Paschal or Easter Candle), the distribution of the Body and Blood of Christ (when Mass is celebrated) and the presence and participation of the Christian community gathered in the act of worship.

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

Yes. The funeral liturgy is the most important of the three funeral rites. The funeral liturgy celebrates the Christian life of the deceased and the Christian meaning of death and resurrection.

In a very real sense the funeral liturgy is the second major, and most important, step in the process of grieving the death of the deceased.

- The funeral liturgy is the traditional Christian way for the family and friends to call on God's loving comfort in their time of loss.
- It is a special time for the family, friends and the Christian community to encounter Christ and His loving presence within the liturgy.
- During the funeral liturgy we experience the consolation and compassion of Jesus as the faith community celebrates His victory over death and the grave.
- The funeral liturgy gives us the opportunity to remember the life of the deceased at the same time we celebrate the true meaning of Christian death.

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

Family members and friends are invited to participate in several ways, such as

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

Catholic family members or Catholic friends may also

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

### **Why is the funeral Mass important to Catholics?**

The importance of the funeral Mass in the life of the Catholic community can be found in these words taken from the *Order of Christian Funerals*.

“When one of its members dies, the Church encourages the celebration of the Mass. In the proclamation of the

Scriptures, the saving word of God through the power of the Spirit becomes living and active in the minds and hearts of the community.

Having been strengthened at the table of God's word [Sacred Scripture], the community calls to mind God's saving deeds and offers the Father... the Eucharistic sacrifice of Christ's Passover from death to life ... In communion [the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ], the participants have a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that awaits them and are reminded of Christ's own words: 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood shall live for ever' (John 6:55).

Confident in Jesus' presence among them in the living word [Sacred Scripture], the living sacrifice, the living meal, those present in union with the whole Church offer prayers and petitions for the deceased, whom they entrust to God's merciful love." (OCF #154)

### **Should the funeral be within or outside of Mass?**

The Catholic funeral liturgy usually takes place within the celebration of the Mass. The funeral Mass may take place on any available day of the week that is not a holy day of obligation, Holy Thursday, Good Friday or Holy Saturday nor on the Sundays of Advent, Lent and the Easter Season. (OCF #178)

In the diocese of Kalamazoo the funeral within or outside of Mass is not to be held on a Sunday.

The funeral liturgy outside of Mass may be held on any available weekday.

### **How can the funeral liturgy help to ease the separation caused by death?**

The final commendation with its song of farewell takes place at the conclusion of the funeral liturgy. We enact this rite in order to help the family and others present to express their last good-bye to the deceased.

At the same time the act of commendation and its song of farewell allow us to show respect for the body of the deceased.

"This act of last farewell also acknowledges the reality of separation and affirms that the community and the

deceased, baptized into one Body [of Christ], share the same destiny, resurrection on the last day.” (OCF #146)

The final commendation and the song of farewell conclude the funeral liturgy unless they are to be celebrated at the grave or mausoleum. (OCF #'s 145-147)

### **What is the significance of the song of farewell?**

Sung by the entire community, the song of farewell gives voice to the unspoken words in our hearts.

“The song of farewell, which should affirm hope and trust in the paschal mystery, is the climax of the rite of final commendation. It should be sung to a melody simple enough for all to sing.” (OCF #147)

### **What type of music should be chosen for the funeral Mass or the funeral outside of Mass?**

Hymns, Christian songs and acclamations are an essential part of the funeral liturgy. Secular lyrics are not permitted.

“In the choice of music for the funeral Mass, preference should be given to the singing of the acclamations, the responsorial psalm, the entrance and communion songs and especially the song of farewell at the final commendation.” (OCF #157)

The sung prayer of the Christian community provides comfort to the family and friends of the deceased.

The melodies of the hymns, songs and acclamations should be familiar or simple enough so that family, friends and community members can easily take part. A simple invitation by the music leader to the community to support the family with their singing will give them the necessary “permission” to sing.

### **What is the protocol for using flags at the funeral?**

The use of the American flag is subject to specific civilian, military and religious regulations. Consequently, personal preferences in the use of the flag, however honorable, may at times be restricted.

The *Order of Christian Funerals* has specific regulations for the use of national flags or other insignia during the funeral liturgy. Flags, by their very nature, are symbols of countries, not

universal symbols of Catholicism.

“Any national flags or the flags or insignia of associations to which the deceased belonged are to be removed from the coffin at the entrance of the church. They may be replaced after the coffin has been taken from the church.”  
(OCF #132)

As the body of the deceased is received at the door of the church the coffin is covered with the pall, a symbol of the garment received at baptism. The pall is removed as the body of the deceased is taken from the church.

## **THE COMMITTAL**

### **What is the rite of committal?**

The tradition of Christian burial has always included the ancient practice of burial. This act of love and reverence for the body of the deceased is expressed through the rite of committal. In the gospel of Mark, chapter 15 verses 45-46, we read the account of the burial of Jesus' body in these words:

“Joseph of Arimathea. . . took Jesus down from the cross, wrapped him in a shroud, and laid him in a tomb. . .”.

The *Order of Christian Funerals* speaks of the importance of the committal:

“The rite of committal . . . is the final act of the community of faith in caring for the body of its deceased member.”  
(OCF #204)

### **What is the meaning of the rite of committal?**

“In committing the body to its resting place, the community expresses the hope that, with all those who have gone before marked with the sign of faith, the deceased awaits the glory of the resurrection.

The rite of committal is an expression of the communion that exists between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven: the deceased passes with the farewell prayers of the community of believers into the welcoming company of those who need faith no longer but see God face to face.” (OCF #206)

### **Where is the rite of committal celebrated?**

The rite of committal takes place at the time of interment either at the grave, tomb, mausoleum, crematorium or, when necessary, at sea.

“Whenever possible, the rite of committal is to be celebrated at the site of committal, that is, beside the open grave or place of interment, rather than at a cemetery chapel.” *(OCF #204)*

### **May the family participate in the rite of committal?**

Yes. After the conclusion of the rite at the place of committal family members may make a final gesture of farewell, for example, by placing flowers or soil on the coffin or place of interment. *(OCF #210)*

### **Why is the grave or place of interment important in Catholic tradition?**

The grave or place of interment is a sign of the hope and promise of resurrection.

“Through this act [of committal] the community of faith proclaims that the grave or place of interment . . . has been transformed by means of Christ’s own death and resurrection into a sign of hope and promise.” *(OCF #109, Book of Blessings, #'s 1418, 1424, 1432)*

### **Should the rite of committal be included in the overall funeral plans?**

This final ritual will help the family and friends of the deceased through the grieving process and express the physical separation between them and the deceased.

“The rite marks the separation in this life of the mourners from the deceased, and through it the community assists them as they complete their care for the deceased and lay the body to rest.

The act of committal is a stark and powerful expression of this separation. When carried out in the midst of the community of faith, the committal can help the mourners

to face the end of one relationship with the deceased and to begin a new one based on prayerful remembrance, gratitude, and hope of resurrection and reunion.

By their presence and prayer, members of the community signify their intention to continue to support the mourners in the time following the funeral.” (OCF #213)

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

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

A family member, friend or caregiver should immediately call the parish and arrange for the priest to celebrate the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, which includes Holy Communion, with the person who is ill. (CCC #1514, *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum* #99)

During their time of illness the sick person should continue to receive Holy Communion regularly and especially preceding death, a practice known as Viaticum, which means food for the journey. (CCC #1524, *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum* #175)

### **What should be done when death occurs?**

The closest relative or the one responsible for making funeral arrangements should contact the parish office and a funeral home prior to or immediately following the death of their loved one. They will assist the family in scheduling and preparing the vigil prayer service, the funeral within or outside of Mass and the rite of committal. (OCF #17)

The priest or his delegate may be available to come at the time of death to pray with them in the presence of the deceased or those present may offer prayers on behalf of their loved one.

### **Does the Catholic Church allow cremation?**

The prohibition against Catholics choosing cremation was removed in 1963. *The Code of Canon Law*, 1983, #1176, as well as the *Order of Christian Funerals* (Appendix) allows for cremation when the reasons for doing so are not contrary to Christian belief.

The Church does, by exception, allow for the cremated remains to be present at the celebration of the funeral liturgy

within or outside of Mass. The Bishop of the Diocese of Kalamazoo has delegated this decision to each parish Pastor. The Pastor will consider each individual request for this practice.

The supplemental brochure "*The Church and Cremation*" will answer many of the questions about cremation. This brochure is available from the Diocesan Office of Christian Worship. Contact information is provided at the end of this guide.

### **Do Catholics still pray the Rosary during visitation at the Funeral Home?**

The Rosary is a particularly Catholic devotion and not a familiar form of prayer used by family members and friends of other denominations or religions.

For this reason it may be best for the immediate family to pray the Rosary, for example, as they gather for the first time in the presence of the deceased or at the conclusion of the visitation. A family member or friend may lead the Rosary or it may be prayed individually.

### **What can we do for those who are grieving the death of a loved one?**

The *Order of Christian Funerals* encourages members of the Christian community to respond in concrete ways to the needs of the family of the deceased.

The prayers, symbols, songs, hymns and rituals of the Church will help the family, friends and the Christian community to celebrate the Christian meaning of death and resurrection. Our participation will help the family and friends of the deceased to express in their hearts and voices their feelings of grief and loss.

Our prayers, assistance and physical presence with the family and friends of the deceased are very important and can be a source of comfort to them in their time of need.

## **CONCLUSION**

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

## **Additional Resources**

A condensed brochure version of *A Guide to Catholic Funerals* and the brochure, *The Church and Cremation*, are available by contacting the Office of Christian Worship at

215 N. Westnedge Avenue  
Kalamazoo, MI 49007-3760  
269-349-8714, ext. 245  
[www.dioceseofkalamazoo.org](http://www.dioceseofkalamazoo.org)  
[dreilly@dioceseofkalamazoo.org](mailto:dreilly@dioceseofkalamazoo.org)

---

Bishop James A. Murray  
Bishop of the Diocese of Kalamazoo

October 4, 2006  
Memorial of  
Saint Francis of  
Assisi