

ORDER OF CHRISTIAN FUNERALS

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1. In the face of death, the Church confidently proclaims that God has created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death that bound humanity. Christ ‘achieved his task of redeeming humanity and giving perfect glory to God, principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and glorious ascension.’¹

2. The proclamation of Jesus Christ ‘who was put to death for our sins and raised to life to justify us’ (Romans 4:25) is at the centre of the Church’s life. The mystery of the Lord’s death and resurrection gives power to all of the Church’s activity. ‘For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the sublime sacrament of the whole Church.’² The Church’s liturgical and sacramental life and proclamation of the Gospel make this mystery present in the life of the faithful. Through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and eucharist, men and women are initiated into this mystery. ‘You have been taught that when we were baptized in Christ Jesus we were baptized into his death; in other words when we were baptized we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father’s glory, we too might live a new life. If in union with Christ we have imitated his death, we shall also imitate him in his resurrection’ (Romans 6:3-5).

3. In the eucharistic sacrifice, the Church’s celebration of Christ’s Passover from death to life, the faith of the baptized in the paschal mystery is renewed and nourished. Their union with Christ and with each other is strengthened: ‘Because there is one bread, we who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one bread’ (1 Corinthians 10:17).

4. At the death of a Christian, whose life of faith was begun in the waters of baptism and strengthened at the eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of its confident belief that death is not the end nor does it break the bonds forged in life. The Church also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting word of God and the sacrament of the eucharist.

5. Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and the hope of the just. The Mass, the memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral.

6. The Church through its funeral rites commends the dead to God’s merciful love and pleads for the forgiveness of their sins. At the funeral rites, especially at the celebration of the eucharistic sacrifice, the Christian community affirms and expresses the union of the Church on earth with the Church in heaven in the one great communion of saints. Though separated from the living, the dead are still at one with the community of believers on earth and benefit from their prayers and intercession. At the rite of final commendation and farewell, the community acknowledges the reality of separation and commends the deceased to God. In this way it recognises the spiritual bond that still exists between the living and the dead and proclaims its belief that all the faithful will be raised up and reunited in the new heavens and a new earth, where death will be no more.

7. 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 judgment and meet the human need to turn always to God in times of crisis.

Ministry and Participation

8. 'If one member suffers in the body of Christ which is the Church, all the members suffer with that member' (1 Corinthians 12:26). For this reason, those who are baptized into Christ and nourished at the same table of the Lord are responsible for one another. When Christians are sick, their brothers and sisters share a ministry of mutual charity and 'do all that they can to help the sick return to health, by showing love for the sick, and by celebrating the sacraments with them'.³ So too when a member of Christ's Body dies, the faithful are called to a ministry of consolation to those who have suffered the loss of one whom they love. Christian consolation is rooted in that hope that comes from faith in the saving death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christian hope faces the reality of death and the anguish of grief but trusts confidently that the power of sin and death has been vanquished by the risen Lord. The Church calls each member of Christ's Body— priest, deacon, layperson — to participate in the ministry of consolation: to care for the dying, to pray for the dead, to comfort those who mourn.

Community

9. 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). Each Christian shares in this ministry according to the various gifts and offices in the Church. As part of the pastoral ministry, priests and other ministers should instruct the parish community on the Christian meaning of death and on the purpose and significance of the Church's liturgical rites for the dead. Information on how the parish community assists families in preparing for funerals should also be provided.

By giving instruction, priests should lead the community to a deeper appreciation of its role in the ministry of consolation and to a fuller understanding of the significance of the death of a fellow Christian. Often the community must respond to the anguish voiced by Martha, the sister of Lazarus: 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died' (John 11:21) and must console those who mourn, as Jesus himself consoled Martha: 'Your brother will rise again... I am the resurrection and the life: those who believe in me, though they should die, will come to life; and those who are alive and believe in me will never die' (John 11:25-26). The faith of the Christian community in the resurrection of the dead brings support and strength to those who suffer the loss of those whom they love.

10. 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. Such assistance may allow members of the family to devote time to planning the funeral rites with the priest and other ministers and may also give the family time for prayer and mutual comfort.

11. The community's principal involvement in the ministry of consolation is expressed in its active participation in the celebration of the funeral rites, particularly the vigil for the deceased, the funeral liturgy, and the rite of committal. For this reason these rites should be scheduled at times that permit as many of the community as possible to be present. The assembly's participation can be assisted by the preparation of booklets that contain an outline of the rite, the texts and songs belonging to the people, and directions for posture, gesture, and movement.

12. At the vigil for the deceased or on another occasion before the eucharistic celebration, the presiding minister should invite all to be present at the funeral liturgy and to take an active part in it. The minister may also describe the funeral liturgy and explain why the community gathers to hear the word of God proclaimed and to celebrate the eucharist when one of the faithful dies.

The priest and other ministers should also be mindful of those persons who are not members of the Catholic Church, or Catholics who are not involved in the life of the Church.

13. As a minister of reconciliation, the priest should be especially sensitive to the possible needs for reconciliation felt by the family and others. Funerals can begin the process of reconciling differences and supporting those ties that can help the bereaved adjust to the loss brought about by death. With attentiveness to each situation, the priest can help to begin the process of reconciliation when needed. In some cases this process may find expression in the celebration of the sacrament of penance, either before the funeral liturgy or at a later time.

Liturgical Ministers

Presiding Minister

14. Priests, as teachers of faith and ministers of comfort, preside at the funeral rites, especially the Mass; the celebration of the funeral liturgy is especially entrusted to priests. When no priest is available, deacons, as ministers of the word, of the altar, and of charity, preside at funeral rites. When no priest or deacon is available for the vigil and related rites or the rite of committal, a layperson presides.

Other Liturgical Ministers

15. In the celebration of the funeral rites laymen and laywomen may serve as readers, musicians, ushers, pall-bearers, and, according to existing norms, as special ministers of the eucharist. Priests should instill in these ministers an appreciation of how much the reverent exercise of their ministries contributes to the celebration of the funeral rites. Family members should be encouraged to take an active part in these ministries, but they should not be asked to assume any role that their grief or sense of loss may make too burdensome.

Ministry for the Mourners and the Deceased

Family and Friends

16. In planning and carrying out the funeral rites the priest and all 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 psychological needs of the family and friends of the deceased to express grief and their sense of loss, to accept the reality of death, and to comfort one another.

17. Whenever possible, ministers should involve the family in planning the funeral rites: in the choice of texts and rites provided in the ritual, in the selection of music for the rites, and in the designation of liturgical ministers.

Planning of the funeral rites may take place during the visit of the priest or other minister at some appropriate time after the death and before the vigil service. Ministers should explain to the family the meaning and significance of each of the funeral rites, especially the vigil, the funeral liturgy, and the rite of committal.

If pastoral and personal considerations allow, the period before death may be an appropriate time to plan the funeral rites with the family and even with the family member who is dying. Although planning the funeral before death should be approached with sensitivity and care, it

can have the effect of helping the one who is dying and the family face the reality of death with Christian hope. It can also help relieve the family of numerous details after the death and may allow them to benefit more fully from the celebration of the funeral rites.

Deceased

18. Through the celebration of the funeral rites, the Church manifests its care for the dead, both baptized members and catechumens. In keeping with the provisions of Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 1183, the Church's funeral rites may be celebrated for a child who died before baptism and whose parents intended to have the child baptized. The Church's funeral rites may also be celebrated for a person baptized into another Church or ecclesial community but who was seeking to be received into full communion with the Catholic Church.

At the discretion of the local Ordinary, the Church's funeral rites may be celebrated for a baptized member of another Church or ecclesial community provided this would not be contrary to the wishes of the deceased person and provided the minister of the Church or ecclesial community in which the deceased person was a regular member or communicant is unavailable.

19. Since in baptism the body was marked with the seal of the Trinity and became the temple of the Holy Spirit, Christians respect and honour the bodies of the dead and the places where they rest. Any customs associated with the preparation of the body of the deceased should always be marked with dignity and reverence and never with the despair of those who have no hope. Preparation of the body should include prayer, especially at those intimate moments reserved for family members. For the final disposition of the body, it is the ancient Christian custom to bury or entomb the bodies of the dead; cremation is permitted, unless it is evident that cremation was chosen for anti-Christian motives. In the case of a body donated to science, the funeral rites may be celebrated in the absence of the body, while the rite of committal is held over until such time as final interment or cremation takes place.

20. In countries or regions where an undertaker, and not the family or community, carries out the preparation and transfer of the body, the priest and other ministers are to ensure that the undertakers appreciate the values and beliefs of the Christian community.

The family and friends of the deceased should not be excluded from taking part in the services sometimes provided by undertakers, for example, the preparation and laying out of the body.

Liturgical Elements

21. Since liturgical celebration involves the whole person, it requires attentiveness to all that affects the senses. The readings and prayers, psalms and songs should be proclaimed or sung with understanding, conviction, and reverence. Music for the assembly should be truly expressive of the texts and at the same time simple and easily sung. The ritual gestures, processions, and postures should express and foster an attitude of reverence and reflectiveness in those taking part in the funeral rites. The funeral rites should be celebrated in an atmosphere of simple beauty, in a setting that encourages participation. Liturgical signs and symbols affirming Christian belief and hope in the paschal mystery are abundant in the celebration of the funeral rites, but their undue multiplication or repetition should be avoided. Care must be taken that the choice and use of signs and symbols are in accord with the culture of the people.

The Word of God

Readings

22. In every celebration for the dead, the Church attaches great importance to the reading of the word of God. The readings proclaim to the assembly the paschal mystery, teach remembrance of the dead, convey the hope of being gathered together again in God's kingdom, and encourage the witness of Christian life. Above all, the readings tell of God's designs for a world in which suffering and death will relinquish their hold on all whom God has called his own. A careful selection and use of readings from Scripture for the funeral rites will provide the family and the community with an opportunity to hear God speak to them in their needs, sorrows, fears, and hopes.

23. In the celebration of the liturgy of the word at the funeral liturgy, the biblical readings may not be replaced by non-biblical readings. But during prayer services with the family non-biblical readings may be used in addition to readings from Scripture.

24. Liturgical tradition assigns the proclamation of the readings in the celebration of the liturgy of the word to readers and the deacon. The presiding minister proclaims the readings only when there are no assisting ministers present. Those designated to proclaim the word of God should prepare themselves to exercise this ministry.⁴

Psalms

25. The psalms are rich in imagery, feeling, and symbolism. They powerfully express the suffering and pain, the hope and trust of people of every age and culture. Above all the psalms sing of faith in God, of revelation and redemption. They enable the assembly to pray in the words that Jesus himself used during his life on earth. Jesus, who knew anguish and the fear of death, 'offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears, to the one who had the power to save him out of death... Although he was Son, he learned to obey through suffering; but having been made perfect, he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation... (Hebrews 5:7-9). In the psalms the members of the assembly pray in the voice of Christ, who intercedes on their behalf before the Father.⁵ The Church, like Christ, turns again and again to the psalms as a genuine expression of grief and of praise and as a sure source of trust and hope in times of trial. Priests and other ministers are, therefore, to make an earnest effort through an effective catechesis to lead their communities to a clearer and deeper grasp of at least some of the psalms provided for the funeral rites.

26. The psalms are designated for use in many places in the funeral rites (for example, as responses to the readings, for the processions, for use at the vigil for the deceased). Since the psalms are songs, whenever possible, they should be sung.

Homily

27. A brief homily based on the readings is always given after the gospel reading at the funeral liturgy and may also be given after the readings at the vigil service; but there is never to be a eulogy. Attentive to the grief of those present, the homilist should dwell on God's compassionate love and on the paschal mystery of the Lord, as proclaimed in the Scripture readings. The homilist should also help the members of the assembly to understand that the mystery of God's love and the mystery of Jesus' victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased and that these mysteries are active in their own lives as well. Through the homily members of the family and community should receive consolation and strength to face the death of one of their members with a hope nourished by the saving word of God. Laypersons who preside at the funeral rites give an instruction on the readings.

Prayers and Intercessions

28. In the presidential prayers of the funeral rites the presiding minister addresses God on behalf of the deceased and the mourners in the name of the entire Church. From the variety of prayers provided the minister in consultation with the family should carefully select texts that truly capture the unspoken prayers and hopes of the assembly and also respond to the needs of the mourners.

29. Having heard the word of God proclaimed and preached, the assembly responds at the vigil and at the funeral liturgy with prayers of intercession for the deceased and all the dead, for the family and all who mourn, and for all in the assembly. The holy people of God, confident in their belief in the communion of saints, exercise their royal priesthood by joining together in this prayer for all those who have died.⁶

Several models of intercessions are provided within the rites for adaptation to the circumstances.

Music

30. Music is integral to the funeral rites. It allows the community to express convictions and feelings that words alone may fail to convey. It has the power to console and uplift the mourners and to strengthen the unity of the assembly in faith and love. The texts of the songs chosen for a particular celebration should express the paschal mystery of the Lord's suffering, death, and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture.

31. Since music can evoke strong feelings, the music for the celebration of the funeral rites should be chosen with great care. The music at funerals should support, console, and uplift the participants and should help to create in them a spirit of hope in Christ's victory over death and in the Christian's share in that victory.

32. Music should be provided for the vigil and funeral liturgy and, whenever possible, for the funeral processions and the rite of committal. The specific notes that precede each of these rites suggest places in the rites where music is appropriate. Many musical settings used by the parish community during the liturgical year may be suitable for use at funerals. Efforts should be made to develop and expand the parish's repertoire for use at funerals.

33. An organist or other instrumentalist, a cantor, and, whenever possible, even a choir should assist the assembly's full participation in singing the songs, responses, and acclamations of these rites.

Silence

34. Prayerful silence is an element important to the celebration of the funeral rites. Intervals of silence should be observed, for example, after each reading and during the final commendation and farewell, to permit the assembly to reflect upon the word of God and the meaning of the celebration.

Symbols

Easter Candle and Other Candles

35. The Easter candle reminds the faithful of Christ's undying presence among them, of his victory over sin and death, and of their share in that victory by virtue of their initiation. It recalls the Easter Vigil, the night when the Church awaits the Lord's resurrection and when new light for the living and the dead is kindled. During the funeral liturgy and also during the vigil service,

when celebrated in the church, the Easter candle may be placed beforehand near the position the coffin will occupy at the conclusion of the procession.

According to local custom, other candles may also be placed near the coffin during the funeral liturgy as a sign of reverence and solemnity.

Holy Water

36. Blessed or holy water reminds the assembly of the saving waters of baptism. In the rite of reception of the body at the church, its use calls to mind the deceased's baptism and initiation into the community of faith. In the rite of final commendation the gesture of sprinkling may also signify farewell.

Incense

37. Incense is used during the funeral rites as a sign of honour to the body of the deceased; which through baptism became the temple of the Holy Spirit. Incense is also used as a sign of the community's prayers for the deceased rising to the throne of God and as a sign of farewell.

Other Symbols

38. If it is the custom in the local community, a pall may be placed over the coffin when it is received at the church. A reminder of the baptismal garment of the deceased, the pall is a sign of the Christian dignity of the person. The use of the pall also signifies that all are equal in the eyes of God (see James 2:1-9).

A Book of the Gospels or a Bible may be placed on the coffin as a sign that Christians live by the word of God and that fidelity to that word leads to eternal life.

A cross may be placed on the coffin as a reminder that the Christian is marked by the cross in baptism and through Jesus' suffering on the cross is brought to the victory of his resurrection.

Fresh flowers, used in moderation, can enhance the setting of the funeral 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.

Liturgical Colour

39. The liturgical colour chosen for funerals should express Christian hope in the light of the paschal mystery, but without being offensive to human grief.

White expresses the hope of Easter, the fulfilment of baptism, and the wedding garment necessary for the kingdom. Violet recalls the eschatological expectation of Advent and the Lenten preparation for the paschal mystery. Black is used as a token of mourning, but, in our society, increasingly without the associations of Christian hope.

The choice should be made in the light of local custom and perceptions, and in consultation with the family and community.

Ritual Gestures and Movement

40. The presiding minister or an assisting minister may quietly direct the assembly in the movements, gestures, and posture appropriate to the particular ritual moment or action.

41. Processions, especially when accompanied with music and singing, can strengthen the bond of communion in the assembly. For processions, ministers of music should give preference to settings of psalms and songs that are responsorial or litanic in style and that allow the people to

respond to the verses with an invariable refrain. During the various processions, it is preferable that the pallbearers carry the coffin as a sign of reverence and respect for the deceased. Family members or friends will be especially appropriate for this task. The mourners who follow the coffin may carry lighted candles which can be set down around the catafalque or the grave.

42. Processions continue to have special significance in funeral celebrations, as in Christian Rome where funeral rites consisted of three ‘stages’ or ‘stations’ joined by two processions. Christians accompanied the body on its last journey. From the home of the deceased the Christian community proceeded to the church singing psalms. When the service in the church concluded, the body was carried in solemn procession to the grave or tomb. During the final procession the congregation sang psalms praising the God of mercy and redemption and antiphons entrusting the deceased to the care of the angels and saints. The funeral liturgy mirrored the journey of human life, the Christian pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem.

In many places and situations a solemn procession on foot to the church or to the place of committal may not be possible. Nevertheless at the conclusion of the funeral liturgy an antiphon or versicle and response may be sung as the body is taken to the entrance of the church. Psalms, hymns, or liturgical songs may also be sung when the participants gather at the place of committal.

Selection of Rites from the Order of Christian Funerals

43. The Order of Christian Funerals makes provision for the minister, in consultation with the family, to choose those rites and texts that are most suitable to the situation: those that most closely apply to the needs of the mourners, the circumstances of the death, and the customs of the local Christian community. The minister and family may be assisted in the choice of a rite or rites by the reflections preceding each rite or group of rites.

44. Part I, ‘Funeral Rites’, of the Order of Christian Funerals provides those rites that may be used in the funerals of Christians and is divided into three groups of rites that correspond in general to the three principal ritual moments in Christian funerals: ‘Vigil and Related Rites and Prayers’, ‘Funeral Liturgy’, and ‘Rite of Committal’.

45. The section entitled ‘Vigil and Related Rites and Prayers’ includes rites that may be celebrated between the time of death and the funeral liturgy or, should there be no funeral liturgy, before the rite of committal. The vigil is the principal celebration of the Christian community during the time before the funeral liturgy. It may take the form of a liturgy of the word or of some part of the office for the dead. Two vigil services are provided: ‘Vigil for the Deceased’ and ‘Vigil for the Deceased with Reception at the Church’. The second service is used when the vigil is celebrated in the church and the body is to be received at this time.

This section also includes ‘Prayers’ and ‘Related Rites’ which provide four brief rites that may be used on other occasions: ‘Prayers after Death’, ‘Gathering in the Presence of the Body’, ‘Simple Form of the Reception of the Body’, and ‘Gathering of the Family and Transfer of the Body’. These rites are examples or models of what can be done and should be adapted to the circumstances.

46. The section entitled ‘Funeral Liturgy’ provides two forms of the funeral liturgy, the central celebration of the Christian community for the deceased: ‘Funeral Mass’ and ‘Funeral Liturgy outside Mass’. When one of its members dies, the Church especially encourages the celebration of the Mass. When Mass cannot be celebrated (see no. 189), the second form of the funeral liturgy may be used and a Mass for the deceased should be celebrated, if possible, at a later time,

47. The section entitled 'Rite of Committal' includes seven forms in all: The 'Rite of Committal at a Cemetery' and 'Rite of Committal at a Crematorium' are used when the final commendation is celebrated as part of the conclusion of the funeral liturgy. The 'Rite of Committal at a Cemetery with Final Commendation' and 'Rite of Committal at a Crematorium with Final Commendation' are used when the final commendation does not take place during the funeral liturgy, or when the funeral liturgy does not immediately precede the committal.

The 'Rite of Committal for Burial' and 'Rite of Committal for Cremation' are intended for use at a cemetery or crematorium chapel when no other liturgical celebration at all has taken place, and they incorporate elements of the funeral liturgy itself.

A seventh form is provided for the burial of ashes,

48. Part II, 'Funeral Rites for Children', provides an adaptation of the principal rites in Part I: 'Vigil for a Deceased Child', 'Funeral Liturgy', and 'Rite of Committal'. These rites may be used in the funerals of infants and young children, including those of early school age. The rites in Part II include texts for use in the case of a baptized child and in the case of a child who died before baptism.

In some instances, for example, the death of an infant, the vigil and funeral liturgy may not be appropriate. Only the rite of committal and perhaps one of the forms of prayer with the family as provided in 'Related Rites and Prayers' may be desirable, Part II does not contain 'Related Rites and Prayers', but the rites from Part I may be adapted.

49. Part III, 'Funerals for Catechumens: Guidelines and Texts', includes guidelines and texts for such celebrations.

Part IV, 'Office for the Dead', includes 'Morning Prayer' and 'Evening Prayer'.

Part V, 'Additional Texts', contains: a collection of prayers for particular categories of persons, for example, priests, married couples, young people; and specific circumstances, for example, suicide, violent death, long illness; a variety of prayers for mourners; and processional psalms.

Endnotes

1. Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, art. 5.
2. Ibid.
3. See Roman Ritual. Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum. General Introduction, no. 33.
4. See Lectionary for Mass (2nd *editio typica*, 1981), General Introduction, nos. 49, 52, and 55.
5. See General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours, no. 109.
6. See *De Oratone communi seu fidelium* (2nd ed., Vatican Polyglot Press, 1966), chapter 1, no. 3, p. 7: tr., Documents on the Liturgy (The Liturgical Press, 1982), no. 1893.