

# THE ORDER OF CHRISTIAN FUNERALS

## GUIDELINES FOR ROMAN CATHOLIC FUNERALS

This booklet is a guide to the requirements of the new Funeral Rite which will begin to be used from November 2nd 1990. It is intended to help all those involved who arrange and conduct funerals and committals.

It has been produced by the Liturgy Office of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales for circulation to Funeral Directors, Crematoria Directors and Catholic Priests.

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## GUIDELINES FOR ROMAN CATHOLIC FUNERALS

The introduction of new funeral rites presents an ideal opportunity to clarify for our colleagues in the funeral business the future expectations of the R. C. community.

We are grateful for the high level of co-operation between funeral directors, crematoria directors and the Catholic Church, and what follows is in no way intended to be a criticism of current procedure. We realise that there has been a great disparity of practice hitherto and that a legitimate variety of local customs will continue, but a whole new range of options will be provided whose use will be officially encouraged.

The new rites may be used from the date of publication (2 November 1990), but will become mandatory from Easter 1991 (31 March).

The new funeral rites presume that where possible there will be a threefold structure — some service(s) at home or in church before the funeral; the funeral service (usually, but not always, Mass) and the committal. The Church understands these different rites as the way in which the local parish community accompanies the mourners on their farewell journey. A more detailed breakdown of this structure follows.

### PRE-FUNERAL SERVICES

A number of points are set out in the book:—

- a **'Prayers after Death'**: usually led by the priest (or layperson) shortly after death. This will normally happen before the body has been moved from home or hospital.
- b **'Gathering in the Presence of the Body'**: used, for example when members of the family first come together to view the body in the home, mortuary, funeral home.
- c **'Gathering of the Family and Transfer of the Body'**: This service may be used if the family gather in the funeral home or in their own home (with the body) immediately prior to setting out for the church or place of committal.
- d **'Reception of the Body at church'**: In many parts of the country where this happens the night before a large crowd has customarily gathered. In other places there have been few, or indeed no mourners. 'The Reception of the Body' would now normally be accompanied by a longer 'Vigil' service — a chance for the local parish community to pray with the family mourners on the night before the funeral: also a chance for those who may not be able to come to the funeral to be present for a service beforehand. The vigil may take place at home or in the funeral home or other suitable place.

For all services prior to the funeral itself, we would be grateful if funeral directors could ascertain whether the family would like the coffin to remain open, if appropriate. Provision exists in these services for the minister and mourners to sign the forehead of the deceased followed by the closure of the coffin.

Whether the body is brought to church on the night before the funeral or immediately prior to the funeral Mass/liturgy, there will always be a formal reception at the church door.

If the coffin is brought to church the night before, there is no need to stay for the vigil, if this follows, unless someone is required to secure the lid after closure. Likewise, if there is a reception of the body the night before, there is no need to be present for the whole of the funeral Mass/liturgy. A reception and vigil the night before will in fact lessen the time necessary for funeral directors to be in church.

## **THE FUNERAL MASS/LITURGY**

If the body is received immediately prior to the funeral mass, it is important to remember that this is an integral part of the service. The priest will not want to begin until the advertised time, so it is better not to be waiting around for more than a few moments beforehand. On no account should the coffin be brought into church and put in place without the congregation being present.

Normally when the main funeral service is in church it will take the form of Mass. But there may be reasons why this doesn't happen. If no priest is available, a funeral liturgy (or scripture readings, music and prayers) can be led by some other person or the family may choose not to have a Mass, especially if neither they nor the deceased were active in the life of the church community. Some delicacy and tact is required here because while the mourners may not have strong church connections, the deceased may well have been active in the parish community. A sensitive discernment is important here — especially if there has been no contact with the priest at this stage. The ideal solution is a form of service which is right for the majority of people, but particularly the family who will always have the last say in this, but remember, they may appreciate a bit of guidance.

A funeral mass is likely to take about 45 minutes, a funeral liturgy will be a little shorter. Music is envisaged as being integral to the rites. Hopefully, in time, parish musicians will be available to offer help here. In the meantime any standby organists whom you are able to provide for the church will surely appreciate some help in discovering the musical implications of the new rite.

In some parts of the country the custom of two funeral masses has developed in recent years - one the night before and the other on the morning of the funeral. Two funeral masses are no longer permitted because there is only one funeral. If the mass is celebrated on the evening before the committal, then a simple service of 'Morning Prayer' with 'Commendation' may follow the next day. If the funeral mass is on the day of committal, then the appropriate rite the previous evening is 'Reception of the Body with Vigil'

## COMMITTAL

Several possibilities are provided here.

If there has been a service in church, the committal at the graveside or in the crematorium is fairly short. At the graveside service the priest will invite the mourners at the end of the service to make a suitable gesture of farewell. This may take the form of sprinkling the coffin with holy water, but there will be those from other traditions who will feel happier if the opportunity is given to sprinkle earth. Try to ensure that earth is available for this purpose. Obviously in this, as in many areas, we are dealing with customs, which may vary considerably from one part of the country to another. We are not trying to impose one gesture in favour of others. All are legitimate and options should be provided.

Occasionally the presence of a priest (or other minister) will be requested when burial takes place some time after the funeral service or in a different location. The form of service used for these occasions is similar, but slightly longer than the form normally used, but the practices are the same as above.

There will be situations in which the family choose not to come to church for the funeral, but to have the whole service at the crematorium or in the cemetery chapel and graveside. It is not an ideal solution because the service has to try and combine the elements associated with all the other rites which are seen as part of a gradual journey of farewell. Before a family make this choice, they should be assured that the fact that even though they or the deceased may not have been active Catholics, we would in no way want them to feel unwelcome at the church. On the contrary, from a pastoral point of view, the more contact the local community — through the priest and/or parish members/bereavement counsellors — has with the family beforehand, the easier it will be to help them in their time of grief.

The 'one-stop' service can make this task more difficult, but if it is chosen, please try to ensure that the local church is put in contact with the family prior to the service, even if it is likely to be a priest/ deacon on duty at one of the larger city crematoria.

## NOTES FOR FUNERAL DIRECTORS

If the priest has not been present at the deathbed, the book provides for an informal service with the family, and when feasible, in the presence of the body. We would ask that, where possible, funeral directors should not remove the body until the priest (or someone from the Church) has been contacted and had the opportunity to visit.

Wherever possible, funeral directors and priests should try to find a mutually agreeable time for the funeral service(s). From our point of view this is to ensure that a congregation can be present for the main funeral service. We regard this as a major priority.

When arranging a funeral the family may be confused and unaware of some of the options open to them, for example at a crematorium the coffin may remain on view at the end of the service, or may be removed during it. Funeral directors can give an invaluable service in assisting the family to decide on such details and ensuring that the wishes of the family are carried out.

Despite long-standing tradition that a raised crucifix has been an integral fixture on most coffins used at R. C. funerals, it is envisaged, in future, that the coffin may be covered by an unadorned white pall and that, as part of the service, a crucifix/ cross and/or bible may be placed on top. This would seem to indicate a flat surface.

If a white pall (a large white cloth used to cover the coffin) is used, funeral directors may be asked to help fold it after its removal at the end of the funeral service.

Because a white pall and/or a cross or bible may be put on the coffin at the beginning of the service, we would ask that any other covering (e.g. flags or flowers/ wreaths) be removed at the church door. These may be replaced after leaving the church.

The flowers may be placed in some suitable place near the coffin. Likewise provision should be made (e.g. a nearby table or basket) for the placing of Mass/sympathy cards **near** but not **on** the coffin.

The rite favours the involvement of as many family/friends as possible in the funeral service. This would certainly include the carrying of the coffin where willing and able mourners are available. The rite would seem to favour the carrying rather than the wheeling of the coffin.

A change which funeral directors are likely to notice in future is the involvement of lay people in leading some of the services of the funeral rites. While only a priest can preside at Mass, any other part of the funeral liturgy may be led by a

deacon or lay person (usually referred to as ‘The Minister’). You may therefore find that the initial contact with the church may not be with the priest, but with a designated person or persons who will be involved in the funeral and will be able to help liaise between Church, bereaved and funeral directors. This is likely to be something that becomes more common in the future. But for the present, don’t be too alarmed — there will be no overnight change.

In placing notices in newspapers, please note that the new rites use the following terminology:

‘Reception of the Body at church’ and ‘Vigil’ (a pre-funeral service in church at home, or in the funeral home)

‘Funeral Mass’ (rather than ‘Requiem Mass’) or ‘Funeral Liturgy’ (a service in church without Mass)

‘Committal’ refers always to the service at the cemetery or crematorium

## **CHILDREN’S FUNERALS**

Separate texts are provided for the funerals of children, but the same principles apply with regard to preparation with the family beforehand and the provisions for the funeral itself. There are however two points worth noting.

- a If the child who died was not yet baptised, parents should be assured that the Church is there for them in their time of grief.
- b In the case of a stillbirth or a neo-natal death, please tell parents that we have a simple service of commendation which has been prepared with these circumstances of death especially in mind. This service may take place in whatever place seems appropriate — home, hospital, church or place of committal.

## **THE BURIAL OF ASHES**

After cremation a large proportion of remains are unclaimed. Our new funeral rites encourage the burial or strewing (burial of ashes, not in a casket, below the surface of the earth) in keeping with the ancient tradition of Christian burial. A number of churches are making provision for the burial of ashes in the church grounds. If this happens it will be sufficient for the funeral director to leave the remains with either the family or the priest/minister. There is no need for a funeral director to be present for the burial. Because remains in a container should be able to return to the earth by a natural process of decay, the container should be biodegradable. The scattering of ashes, while not explicitly forbidden, is not encouraged by the Church.

## **GUIDELINES FOR ROMAN CATHOLIC FUNERALS AT A CREMATORIUM**

It is not many years ago that cremations were a rarity for Catholics. Indeed for various reasons they were not permitted until 1965, but now they are a regular and frequent part of our funeral practices.

Since 1972 we have been using the texts produced for use by Roman Catholics at a crematorium. These texts, originally published in a separate booklet, have more recently been incorporated into the 'Green Book' in use in most crematoria. With the publication of our new funeral services, our latest texts will be inserted in the revised edition of this book, to be reprinted shortly. Until remaining stocks of the Joint Funeral Group's book for the congregation are replaced, a leaflet containing the Catholic section will be available.

### **SIGNS AND SYMBOLS**

Our new funeral services make widespread use of signs and symbols familiar to Catholics in their church buildings and in their prayer life. Provision is made for the use of candles, water and incense, and we would hope that their use will be permitted in a crematorium. A separate 'Committal Book' has been published by Geoffrey Chapman for use by the priest/minister at a crematorium or cemetery. It is hoped that each crematorium will have a copy of this book, and in time, of a book of scripture readings (called a lectionary) which will be published in the near future. The local clergy will be glad to assist you with advice over the provision of these books, vessels and artefacts.

### **MUSIC**

Our new funeral rites see music as integral to the service. For this reason we would always see live music as being pre-eminent. Where only pre-recorded music is available, crematorium authorities should liaise with local clergy to ensure that suitable music is available.

Books containing the music for the funeral rite are available, it would be helpful if each crematorium was equipped with these.

### **TIME**

We realise that time is at a premium, especially in busy city crematoria. This being the case the priest/minister may have to adapt the service to comply with the restrictions. The service book indicates the moment at which committal takes place. This may be during or at the end of the service.

## **FORMS OF SERVICE**

If there has been a service in church beforehand, the rite to be used at the crematorium is fairly short. So, if the funeral party has not arrived at the appointed hour, there is no need for undue concern. The priest/ minister should be able to complete the service well within the allocated time, even if the party arrives a few minutes late.

Sometimes, however, the entire funeral service will take place at the crematorium. It is in these circumstances that the time element will be a problem. Where 45 minutes is allowed, there should be no difficulty. If the spacing is at intervals of 30 minutes or less, then it would be helpful to liaise with the funeral director to see whether the final time slot of the day could be allocated to such a service (always remembering that the family's needs come first) or another space when there is a free slot following.

At some point in the service, whatever form it takes, the priest will invite mourners to come and make a gesture of farewell. They may want to come forward and touch the coffin. They may wish to sprinkle holy water. Local customs will vary.

## **BURIAL OF ASHES**

The notes provided for funeral directors apply here also. When ashes are buried or strewn in crematoria grounds, this would require the supervision of the Crematoria authorities. But when burial or strewing is in the church grounds they are no longer the responsibility of the crematorium authority.