

ADDENDUM #3

Planning a Catholic Funeral¹⁷

When it comes to the celebrations of weddings and funerals, we tend to think of them as primarily family events, and such they are, but they are not *entirely* family events: the minute we walk through the doors of the church, these family events become parish events. That which seemed so very private now becomes public, and this public sacramental celebration becomes part of the patrimony of the Church.

The rites do not belong to individuals, they belong to the Church as a whole. As individuals, couples, and even families, we participate in something larger than ourselves when we celebrate the rites of the Church.

Sometimes, people will develop some ideas for funeral celebrations that are quite personalized, or ideas that come from attendance at a funeral in another faith tradition, only to find that their ideas do not mesh with the Rite of Christian Funerals as prescribed by the Church. The Church maintains rites for various celebrations, not to place limits on personal expression, but to provide the consistency, dignity and solemnity, which these rites provide. Celebrating the ritual for funerals in the Church actually strengthens us for the task at hand: burying our beloved. Since, then, we do not need to “reinvent the wheel” each time we celebrate a funeral, we are liberated from the potentially burdensome task of over-or under-planning the liturgy and allow the beauty, sacredness and peace of the rite to carry through.

While planning a wedding, a priest works with a couple well in advance of their wedding day, using the liturgy planning itself as a teaching moment. Some unusual expectations can be reeled-in and others brought forward to help the couple plan a celebration that is truly Catholic.

For funerals, however, this teaching moment comes at a time of grieving for family members, and, for some people who are not practicing their faith, a time of first contact with the Church after many years' absence. They are surprised to find that aspects of non-Catholic funerals, which they have attended, are not in accordance with the *Order of Christian Funerals* governing Catholic funeral rites. It is the role and responsibility of the priest patiently and charitably to guide them toward the liturgically appropriate elements of a Catholic funeral Mass.

A funeral Mass can be very spiritually fulfilling and emotionally satisfying without over-personalization. The rites themselves, formed over hundreds of years of faith practice, can bring hope, peace and renewal. We can trust the Church's guidance in these matters and even find true joy in our celebrations.

¹⁷ The following information is presented with due regard and attention to canons 1176-1185 of the *Code of Canon Law*; it is an adaptation of the booklet entitled, *A Catholic Funeral at St. Augustine Church*, prepared by Rev. Thomas L. Mosher, a priest of the Diocese of Burlington.

Celebration of the Funeral Liturgy

The time immediately following death is often one filled with bewilderment and may involve shock and heartrending grief for the family and close friends. The ministry of the Church at this time is one of gently accompanying the mourners in their ritual adjustment to the fact of death and to the sorrow this entails. Through the funeral rites, the priest and/or deacon help the mourners to express their sorrow and to find strength and consolation through faith in Christ and His resurrection to eternal life. The members of the Christian community offer support to the mourners, especially by praying that the one they have lost may have eternal life.

The *Order of Christian Funerals* is celebrated in three stations: the Vigil for the Deceased, the Funeral Liturgy and the Rite of Committal. The Vigil, as its name implies, is generally celebrated the night before the Funeral Mass, at the funeral home.

The Vigil for the Deceased

At the Vigil the Christian community keeps watch with the family in prayer to the God of mercy and finds strength in Christ's presence. It is the first occasion among the funeral rites for the solemn reading of the Word of God. In this time of loss the family and community turn to God's Word as the source of faith and hope, as light and life in the face of darkness. Consoled by the redeeming Word of God and by the abiding present of Christ and His Spirit, those assembled at the Vigil call upon the Father of mercy to receive the deceased into the kingdom of peace and light.

The Vigil and Committal services are actually quite brief, in deference to the Funeral Mass, which takes precedence. At the Vigil, there are some Opening Prayers, a proclamation from Sacred Scripture, an optional homily and Intercessions for the deceased. Sacred music may be worked into this celebration as well. If secular music or a eulogy is requested, this takes place following the completion of the rite.

The Funeral Mass

At the Funeral liturgy, the community gathers with the family and friends of the deceased to give praise and thanks to God for Christ's victory over sin and death, to commend the deceased to God's tender mercy and compassion, and to seek strength in the proclamation of the paschal mystery. Through the Holy Spirit the community is joined together in faith as one Body in Christ to reaffirm in sign and symbol, word and gesture, which each believer through Baptism shares in Christ's Death and Resurrection.

Since the church is the place where the community of faith assembles for worship, the rite of the reception of the body at the church has great significance. The Church is the place where the Christian life is begotten in baptism and nourished in the Eucharist.

The church is at once a symbol of the community and the heavenly liturgy that this celebration anticipates. For this reason, we do not celebrate “funeral home funerals”, but move from the Vigil to the church for the funeral Mass. In the act of bringing the body to the church, the members of the community acknowledge the deceased as one of their own, as one who was welcomed in Baptism and who held a place in the assembly. Through the use of various baptismal symbols, we show the reverence due the body, the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Any national flags or insignia of associations to which the deceased belonged are to be removed at the entrance of the church. Then, the baptismal symbols and gestures become evident. They are:

- The Paschal Candle, which is lit and given a place of prominence at the front of the church near where the coffin is placed, reminds us of the light of Christ, given to us at Baptism.
- Sprinkling the coffin with Holy Water recalls the pouring of water in the baptismal celebration, washing away our sin.
- Placing the pall over the coffin recalls the “white garment” we were given at Baptism as a sign of putting on a new life in Christ.
- Later in the liturgy, the body of the deceased is incensed. Though not a baptismal sign, the rising of the smoke from the incense signifies respect for the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit.

In the Liturgy of the Word, the Readings proclaim the paschal mystery, teach remembrance of the dead, convey the hope of being gathered together again God’s kingdom, and encourage the witness of Christian life. Above all, the readings tell of God’s design for a world in which suffering and death will relinquish their hold on all whom God has called His own. The homily, which follows, never a eulogy, builds upon the central message of the readings and gives consolation and strength to those present.

Members of the parish should, whenever possible, attend funerals held in the parish church, even if they do not know the deceased. It is a sign of our oneness in Christ. No one should be buried from an empty church. Lectors, Eucharistic Ministers, Cantors and Servers should offer their services for any Funeral Mass.

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 us 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.

The Rite of Committal, the conclusion of the funeral rites, is the final act of the community of faith in caring for the body of the deceased. It may be celebrated at the grave, tomb, mausoleum or may be used for burial at sea. It usually is to take place directly at the site of committal (the open grave) rather than at a cemetery chapel.

This rite includes prayers offered for blessing of the ground, disposition of the body and for the consolation of those gathered. If military honors are offered, they are done following the completion of the rite.

The Rite of Christian Funerals has been developed over centuries of the Church at prayer, and, as such, reflects understanding of the human need for grieving while at the same time celebrates our belief in the Resurrection of Christ. The rites have a beauty and strength of their own and need very little accommodation to individual circumstances.

Celebrating a Funeral within the Liturgical Season

For most people, when a loved one dies, time stands still; while the rest of the world continues at its previous pace, all seems to stop for those who experience the shock of death. Time has special meaning in the Catholic Church. Various seasons are observed annually, such as Advent, Christmastide, Lent, Eastertide, and the many weeks of Ordinary Time. The unpredictability of human death means that persons may die at very inopportune times, such as a few days before Christmas, or at a special anniversary, etc.

Funerals are always celebrated in the context of the liturgical season in which they fall. So, in the depths of sorrow, one may enter the church for a funeral Mass and find it all decked out for Christmas. On the other hand, a funeral may need to be celebrated in the midst of Lent, when flowers are not brought into the church and all is draped in Lenten purple. However, no matter which liturgical season we happen to be in on the day of the funeral, the ritual reminds us that we are not merely grieving over a loved one's loss, but celebrating his/her entrance through death into the resurrection of Christ.

The liturgical vesture for a Funeral Mass may be white, violet or black (cf. *GIRM*, no. 346; *Order of Christian Funerals*, no. 39).

The following information will help in the planning of funerals.

Sacred Scripture in the Funeral Rites

At the Vigil, the Funeral Mass, and the Final Commendation, Scriptural passages alone are used. We do not substitute Sacred Scripture with selections from other sources of literature, for example, Shakespeare, or poetry, or even a special poem written for the occasion. The proper place for these would be at the funeral home following the Vigil, or at a later time when the family is gathered.

Flowers in the Church

- Casket sprays are removed before the casket is brought into the church. They may be replaced at the cemetery.
- Flowers may be brought from the funeral home or sent directly to the church for the Funeral Mass. They will be placed discreetly so as not to obscure the altar, pulpit, tabernacle, nor block passage for the ministers in the sanctuary.

- Flowers are usually not brought into the church during Lent.
- When the church is decorated for Christmas or Easter, adding extra bouquets may seem redundant and get lost in the decoration already there. You may wish not to bring them during these times.

Scheduling the Funeral Mass

There are some days when Funeral Masses are not permitted:

- Sundays
- Holy Days of Obligation
- The Paschal Triduum: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday

Notes:

- The Vigil Service may be held on a Sunday evening or on the evening of a Holy Day, when the funeral is held the next day.
- If a funeral *must* be celebrated during the Triduum, a *Funeral Service Outside of Mass* (cf. *Order of Christian Funerals*, no. 271) takes the place of the Funeral Mass.

A Note on Dress

A number of people have asked about appropriate dress for a funeral, so the following information is offered. Basic black is still the standard for ladies, and always in good taste. Gentlemen should wear a dark suit. This semi-formal attire is appropriate for all aspects of the funeral gatherings: at the funeral home, the church and the cemetery. Women no longer wear hats in church, but a simple hat with a veil in front is not inappropriate. Dark glasses are not worn in church.

Other Liturgical Considerations

- Placing of the Pall: A funeral pall, reminding us of the garment given at Baptism and, therefore, symbolizing our life in Christ, is draped over the casket at the beginning of the Funeral Mass. Family members or friends are encouraged to do this, although the placing of the pall may also be done by the priest or funeral director.
- Presentation of the Offertory Gifts: Family members or friends may bring forward the bread and wine at the Offertory Procession.
- Holy Communion: Catholics do not practice inter-communion with the ecumenical community. We welcome our fellow Christians to this celebration as our brothers and sisters. We pray that our common Baptism will draw us closer to one another and begin to dispel the sad divisions which separate us. Because we believe that the celebration of the Eucharist is a sign of the reality of the oneness of faith, life and worship, members of those churches with whom we are not yet fully united are ordinarily not admitted to Holy Communion. (Cf. *Guidelines for the Reception of*

Communion, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996¹⁸, and *Sacramental Guidelines for the Diocese of Burlington*, nos. 281-282).

- **The Sacrament of Reconciliation**: People who are alienated from God, the Church, family members or others often are touched by the experience of death and wish to become reconciled. The parish priest will be happy to extend that opportunity through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, hearing Confessions as time permits on the day or evening before the Funeral Mass.
- **Funeral Planning**: The priest or deacon will be happy to meet with the family to plan for the Funeral Mass, discussing Scriptural Readings, music, personal involvement. The Parish Music Minister can discuss liturgical music choices with the family.

Music in the Catholic Funeral Rite

Music in the Funeral Rite allows the community to express convictions and feeling 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.

¹⁸ **Guidelines for the Reception of Communion**

For Catholics: As Catholics we fully participate in the celebration of the Eucharist when we receive Holy Communion. We are encouraged to receive Communion devoutly and frequently. In order to be properly disposed to receive Communion, participants should not be conscious of grave sin, and normally should have fasted for one hour. A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord without prior sacramental confession except for a grave reason where there is no opportunity for confession. In this case, the person is to be mindful of the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, including the intention of confessing as soon as possible (canon 916).

A frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance is encouraged for all.

For our Fellow Christians: We welcome our fellow Christians to this celebration of the Eucharist as our brothers and sisters. We pray that our common baptism and the action of the Holy Spirit in this Eucharist will draw us closer to one another and begin to dispel the sad divisions which separate us. We pray that these lessen and finally disappear, in keeping with Christ's prayer "that they may be one." (John 17:21).

Because Catholics believe that the celebration of the Eucharist is a sign of the reality of the one-ness of faith, life, and worship, members of those churches with whom we are not yet fully united are ordinarily not admitted to Holy Communion. Eucharistic sharing in exceptional circumstances by other Christians requires permission according to the directives of the diocesan bishop and the provisions of canon law (canon 844.4).

Members of the Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Catholic Church are urged to respect the discipline of their own Churches. According to Roman Catholic discipline, the Code of Canon Law does not object to the reception of communion by Christians of these Churches (canon 844.3).

For Those Not Receiving Holy Communion: All who are not receiving Holy Communion are encouraged to express in their hearts a prayerful desire for unity with the Lord Jesus and with one another.

For Non-Christians: We welcome to this celebration those who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ. While we cannot admit them to Holy Communion, we ask them to offer their prayers for the peace and unity of the human family.

Approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996.

The texts of the hymns chosen should express the paschal mystery of the Lord's suffering, death, and triumph over death and should be related to the Readings from Scripture. The texts should help to create in the people present a spirit of hope in sharing in the victory won in the Resurrection of the Lord. The sacred music itself should be appropriate to the solemnity of the occasion. Other sacred music is admissible, such as the *Ave Maria*, especially when the deceased or survivors have a particular devotion to the Blessed Mother. Seasonal hymns are also appropriate, such as Advent hymns during Advent, Lenten hymns, Easter hymns, and so forth. A hymn with a Eucharistic theme is appropriate at Communion time.

Secular songs, even those that were the favorite of the deceased, are not permitted during the Funeral Rite, nor are national or ethnic songs. They have a proper place at the funeral home after the Vigil Service, or at a family celebration following the burial.

More details concerning music during Catholic Funerals can be found in **Addendum #4** of these Guidelines.

The Eulogy

A funeral homily should give us insight into the mystery of Our Lord's Passion, Death and Resurrection and how we participate in this mystery during this life and after our own death. A eulogy speaks more generally of the life of the deceased, and belongs more properly to a setting other than the Mass, such as after the Vigil Service. If a priest allows a eulogy at the Funeral Mass, there are some diocesan guidelines which come into effect:

- Only one person may speak.
- The eulogy may last no longer than five minutes.
- The eulogy must be written out beforehand and be reviewed by the celebrant of the Mass.
- The talk should concentrate on the Christian virtues of the deceased.

The reasons for these regulations are simple. Having too many speakers changes the focus from the Word of God in the Readings to the words of others; a eulogy should not last longer than the homily; sometimes emotions prevent a speaker from remembering his or her words; the words shared should not be merely a biography, or worse, a "roast", but a witness to the faith of the deceased.

Cremation in the Catholic Funeral Rite

The Christian faithful are unequivocally confronted by the mystery of life and death when they are faced with the presence of the body of one who has died. The human body is inextricably associated with the human person. The body, which lies in death, recalls the personal story of faith, the loving family bonds, the friendships, and the words and acts of kindness of the deceased person.

The body of a deceased Catholic Christian is also the body once washed in Baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation, and fed with the Bread of Life. Thus, the Church's reverence for the sacredness of the human body grows out of a reverence and concern both natural and

supernatural for the human person. The body of the deceased brings to mind the Church's conviction that the human body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and is destined for future glory at the resurrection of the dead. The care given to prepare bodies of the deceased for burial befits their dignity, in expectation of their final resurrection in the Lord.

Presence of the Body at the Funeral Rite

Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites. The long-standing practice of burying the body of the deceased in a grave or tomb, in imitation of the burial of Jesus' body, is encouraged as a sign of our Christian faith. When the choice has been made to cremate a body, it is recommended that the cremation take place *after* the Funeral Liturgy.

Respect for the Cremated Remains of a Body

The cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the human body from which they come. This includes the use of a worthy vessel to contain the ashes, the manner in which they are carried, the care and attention to appropriate placement and transport, and the final disposition. The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium. The practice of scattering cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or keeping cremated remains in the home of a relative or friend are not the reverent dispositions that the Church requires.

Presence of Cremated Remains at the Funeral Rite

If cremated remains are brought to the church for the Funeral Rite, care must be taken that all is carried out with due decorum. A small table or stand is to be prepared for them at the place normally occupied by the coffin. The vessel may be carried to its place during the entrance procession or may be placed on this table or stand before the liturgy begins. The cremated remains are sprinkled with holy water at the beginning of the Rite, but the covering with the pall and incensing are omitted.

The rite of Committal is celebrated at the cemetery, mausoleum or columbarium.

ADDENDUM #4

GUIDELINES CONCERNING MUSIC FOR MASSES OF CHRISTIAN BURIAL

Music is integral to the funeral rite. 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. (Cf. *Order of Christian Funerals*, no. 30).

Funeral Directors play an important role in facilitating the planning process for funeral rites. These guidelines have been prepared to assist you with some of the questions and situations you may encounter when dealing with grieving families.

1. How is the music for the Mass of Christian Burial planned?

In most parishes, the pastor will contact the parish musician regarding music for the funeral.

2. Is it permissible for the family to select music for the Mass of Christian Burial?

Not only is it permissible, it is desirable. However, it must be done in consultation with the pastor and the parish musician who are qualified to assist in the choosing of music. It is also appropriate to leave the music selection entirely up to the parish musician, who is a professional. Funeral Directors should refer questions concerning choice of music to the pastor or the parish musician.

3. What kind of music might be considered suitable?

In the choice of music for the Mass of Christian Burial, 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. (Cf. *Order of Christian Funerals*, no. 157).

4. May the family request a popular song which is "special" to them or was a favorite of the deceased?

Since music can evoke strong feelings, the music for the celebration of the funeral rites should be chosen with great care. The music at the Mass 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 the Christian's share in that victory. Therefore, secular music (music which was composed for Broadway or a Top-Forty tune) is not permitted for the Mass of Christian Burial.

5. Could a family's "special" song be sung before the Mass of Christian Burial begins or played as prelude or postlude music?

Secular music, which is not permitted during the Mass of Christian Burial, also would not be permitted before or after Mass.

6. But this "special" or favorite song was used at a relative's funeral. Why can't it be used again?

While secular music has been used at times in some parishes, it is, nevertheless, not permitted. The present diocesan guidelines do not allow the use of secular music in the Funeral Mass.

7. Is there any music during the Final Commendation?

Yes. There is a Song of Farewell. This should be sung and the whole assembly should be able to participate in some way. It should express trustful confidence in the paschal mystery and be experienced as the climax of the rite of final commendation.

8. Is it possible to have a friend or relative of the family sing at the Funeral Mass?

The musical demands of a Mass of Christian Burial are complex and require considerable expertise and experience to be done well. Since there is little preparation time between the time of death and the funeral, this is not always a feasible option. However, it would be better to leave this decision to the parish musician.

9. May a family hire another organist, cantor or musical group not associated with the parish?

Many parishes have contractual agreements and/or policies concerning the use of anyone other than the parish organist or musicians. The pastor will advise you in this matter.

10. How are musicians compensated for providing the ministry of music at a Mass of Christian Burial?

Arrangements for payment should be made in consultation with the funeral director or the pastor of the parish.