

Preparing for a Roman Catholic Funeral Answers to Some Questions You May Have

Perhaps you have “clicked” on this article because you are planning a funeral for a loved one. If so, our prayers are with you and all who are grieving. Perhaps you are merely advancing in years and thinking ahead to this and other end of life issues. If so we hope this information will be helpful and if you have further questions, please contact the Parish Office.

Who may have a Roman Catholic funeral?

All baptized Catholics are entitled to a Roman Catholic funeral. Additionally, catechumens (adults who are preparing for baptism in the Catholic Church,) children who die before they could be baptized and in some circumstances, Christians of other faith traditions may have a Roman Catholic funeral.

What does a Roman Catholic funeral look like?

There are three parts to a Roman Catholic funeral:

- Vigil for the Deceased (occurs during the wake or calling hours)
- Funeral liturgy in the form of Mass (Eucharistic Liturgy) or service of the Word
- Committal of the body into the ground or a crypt

What happens during the Vigil for the Deceased (wake)?

Family and friends come together, most often in the presence of the body, in a space large enough for visitors to greet one another. Common choices are a funeral home or church building. During this time a priest, deacon or lay minister will lead a brief prayer service with scripture readings, intercessions, possibly hymns or other music and the opportunity for reflecting on the life of the deceased. Family and friends are often invited to participate by sharing stories of the deceased or to continue the story telling after the prayer service is concluded.

What is a funeral Mass like?

The funeral Mass follows the same pattern as a typical Mass with additional elements that draw attention to the place the deceased person had in the life of the mourners and most especially, the Christian belief in resurrection. Some of these elements are:

- • Covering the casket with a pall or white cloth which signifies the deceased life in Christ through baptism. This is often done by family members;
- • Sprinkling the casket with holy water, also a remembrance of baptism;
- • Placing Christian symbols on the covered casket. These may include the Book of the Gospels

(the part of the Bible which recalls the life and words of Jesus) and / or a crucifix.

Is there music at a funeral Mass?

Yes. Special hymns are chosen to be part of the funeral Mass. These speak to God's presence even in times of sorrow, of our hope in the resurrection and other themes that allow the participants to pray in this difficult time. A parish music director, priest or other pastoral minister can help with the selection of appropriate and meaningful hymns.

What else happens at a funeral Mass?

A) Special readings from sacred scripture are proclaimed. The Order of Christian Funerals offers a wide array of suggestions. Diocesan guidelines offer additional suggestions and other passages from the Bible may be chosen if appropriate. Typically, there are one or two readings taken from both or either the Old and New Testament (Hebrew and Christian scriptures,) a psalm (usually sung and also taken from the scriptures) and a Gospel reading.

Who may proclaim the readings?

A baptized Christian usually proclaims the first and second reading. A cantor usually proclaims the psalm and an ordained minister (priest or deacon) proclaims the Gospel. Because the purpose of reading from scripture is to provide comfort to mourners as well as speak of Christ's own life and death, it is important that the person who proclaims the scriptures be comfortable speaking in public at a microphone and also able to maintain their composure. Otherwise, God's words may go unheard.

B) The Prayers of the Faithful or Universal Prayer are a series of intercessions taken from the Order of Christian Funerals or composed by a parish minister or the family. Ideally, these will also provide comfort to mourners by referring back to the contributions made by the deceased (e.g. "Mary was a person who reached out to others. For all those who were touched by her generosity and those who remain in need, we pray. Lord hear our prayer") These prayers may also include a remembrance of other deceased family members or close friends.

C) The homily or sermon, offered by a priest or deacon connects the life of the deceased with Christ's life and offers words of comfort and hope to mourners.

D) The Eucharistic Prayer, a prayer said by the priest on behalf of all present, through which Roman Catholics believe the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ also includes a remembrance of the deceased and words of hope for the future, "when every tear will be wiped away."

E) Holy Communion, the Body and Blood of Christ is offered to those who are present. People who normally receive Holy Communion in their parish Catholic church are welcome to receive. Non-Catholics and people who have been away from the practice of the Roman Catholic faith are encouraged to spiritually unite with those who are receiving, praying for the day when all people will be able to gather at the Eucharistic table. Lay parish ministers, family members or friends who are installed as ministers of Holy Communion may assist with distribution of the Body and Blood of Christ.

May anyone beside the priest or deacon speak of the deceased during the funeral Mass?

The funeral Mass provides the opportunity for a brief reflection on the life of the deceased after Communion. Alternatively, some parishes move the time for this reflection to right before Mass begins, after the mourners have assembled, so that those who have gathered in support of the family, but who may not know the deceased personally, will have a better appreciation for who this person was.

When would one choose a service of the Word rather than a Mass?

Circumstances that would make this a necessary or preferable option are:

- When no priest is available to celebrate Mass;
- The majority of the mourners are not Roman Catholic or have not actively practiced the Roman Catholic faith in a very long time and would feel uncomfortable in an unfamiliar ritual. In this circumstance, however, consideration is also rightly given to the life of the person who died and what might most accurately reflect and respect their faith life and relationship with the Roman Catholic Church.

What considerations are made when the deceased is a Veteran?

- The casket may be covered with the American flag as it is brought into the church. The flag is then respectfully removed and placed elsewhere and the casket is covered with a pall (large white cloth signifying baptism.) The flag may be placed again on the casket at the end of the funeral before it is carried out of the church.
- Mention may be made in the homily and Prayers of the Faithful of the person's military service.

Is there anything else that one might expect to see during a Roman Catholic funeral Mass?

Sometimes incense is used. It signifies our prayers "rising" and shows our special respect for the body of the deceased and the bread and wine that will be used to become the Body and Blood of Christ.

What happens at the graveside or mausoleum?

This is a very brief service consisting of prayers and a short reading from the scriptures. A brief reflection might be offered by the priest, lay minister or family spokesperson, especially if some time has passed since the funeral Mass or Word service (as with spring interment after a winter death.)

May a Roman Catholic be cremated?

Yes. Ideally, the cremation occurs after the funeral Mass so that the rituals which demonstrate the Roman Catholic respect for the human body may be used. However, if the deceased is cremated prior to the funeral Mass, the rituals and words are slightly changed to remove

references to the presence of the body. Because of the Roman Catholic belief in the resurrection of the body cremated remains are to be interred in their entirety, placed in the ground or a mausoleum. Burial at sea is possible as long as the cremated remains are encased in a container.

Who Needs to Know About the Plans I Am Making?

The first person with whom you should share your desires and thoughts is the parish leader (priest or parish life director) or his or her delegate, a pastoral minister. In service to their people, parish leaders are compassionate and open to providing funeral liturgies that comfort the sorrowful and honor the life of the deceased while respecting the traditions and beliefs of the Catholic Church. After consulting with the parish leader, it is good to share your plans with family members and the funeral director of your choice.