

*Now I am going to tell you a mystery: Not all of us shall fall asleep, but all of us are to be changed — in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye.*

1 CORINTHIANS 15:51



# CHRISTIAN FUNERAL RITES

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# CHRISTIAN FUNERAL RITES

## I. INTRODUCTION

Death can be a time of profound grief for the loved ones of the deceased, but it can also be a time of healing and deepening of faith. Priests, deacons and other liturgical ministers are encouraged to see this occasion as an opportunity to be of service to our brothers and sisters in helping them accept courageously the mystery of death as a way to bring full meaning to their lives. This policy is meant to help priests, deacons, and other liturgical ministers to embrace the Paschal character of a Christian's death in planning and conducting the funeral liturgies so as to assist families and friends of the deceased, and the larger Christian community, to celebrate the mystery of human death within the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

The Christian funeral ritual has sacred purposes:

- To proclaim our absolute faith in the transforming reality of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the midst of a world of others who may, or may not believe;
- To provide a concrete way for the living to begin the painful process of continuing life in the midst of grief, supported by the church and her members;
- To bless and sanctify the passing of one of our own to the fulfillment of the Scriptural promise of eternal life, in the midst of the worship life of the community of believers.

The *Order of Christian Funerals (OCF)* states: "By means of the funeral rites it has been the practice of the Church, as a tender mother, not simply to commend the dead to God, but also to raise high the hope of its children and give witness to its faith in the future resurrection of the baptized with Christ" (*OCF*, p. xi).

It should always be our intent to celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of life now returned to God, and to rekindle the hope of the just, even in the hour of grief over the loss of a loved one.

The Church calls each member of Christ's body to participate in the ministry of consolation; to care for the dying, to pray for the dead and to comfort those who mourn.

## II. THOSE TO WHOM RITES ARE TO BE OFFERED

- FR 1. Funeral rites are to be provided for baptized Catholics and for catechumens, since they are considered to be members of the Christian faithful (see *CIC*, c.1183 §1).**
- FR 2. Out of pastoral concern for the families, that they may know God's consolation and the care of the Church, the Archbishop extends permission to pastors to offer Catholic funeral rites to children who died before their baptism but whose parents intended that they be baptized. This permission also extends to the fetus or stillborn children no matter how death occurred (see *OCF*, 237).**
- FR 3. The Archbishop also extends permission to pastors to grant Catholic funeral rites to non-Catholic baptized persons unless it is evidently contrary to their will and provided their own minister is not available. This is especially appropriate in cases when the surviving spouse is Catholic. In doubtful cases the Archbishop is to be consulted (see *CIC*, c. 1183 §3).**

Funerals for non-Catholics may be permitted under the following circumstances:

- The deceased must have been validly baptized;
  - The non-Catholic minister is not available, and;
  - There is no indication that the person would not have wanted a Catholic funeral (see *CIC*, c. 1183).
- FR 4. Since suicide is very often the result of mental illness, and the circumstances surrounding such a death are often unclear, suicide in and of itself is not to be considered a reason for denying funeral rites (see *CCC*, 2282). Pastors and all other ministers are encouraged to approach such a situation with sensitivity and great pastoral care, and should consider “the spiritual and psychological needs of the family and friends of the deceased.” (*OCF*, 16)**

## III. DENIAL OF FUNERAL RITES

- FR 5. Funeral rites may only be denied to notorious apostates, heretics, schismatics, persons who chose cremation for reasons opposed to Christian faith, and other manifest sinners to whom granting funeral rites would cause public scandal to the**

**faithful. In doubtful cases the Archbishop is to be consulted and his judgment is to be followed (see *CIC*, c. 1184 §§1-2).**

- FR 6. Especially when the above mentioned cases involve prominent public figures, elected officials and unusual circumstances such as physician assisted suicide, pastors are to consult with Archbishop before making arrangement so that proper pastoral care can be provided to the grieving family while avoiding scandal to the faithful.**
- FR 7. Lack of registration in a parish is not to be used as a reason for denying funeral rites in the parish in which they lived.**

#### **IV. PLACE OF CELEBRATION**

- FR 8. The funeral rites for the faithful departed are to be celebrated in his or her parish church. At the request of the deceased or those charged with arranging the funeral, the funeral rites may be celebrated in another Catholic church with the consent of those having charge of the Church and after having informed the deceased person's pastor (see *CIC*, c. 1177 §§1-3).**
- FR 9. A Funeral Mass is not permitted to be celebrated in a funeral home or a private home. In cases of necessity the Archbishop may permit a Funeral Mass to be celebrated in another sacred space.**

#### **V. MINISTERS**

- FR 10. "Priests, as teachers of the faith and ministers of comfort, preside at the funeral rites, especially the Mass; the celebration of the funeral liturgy is especially entrusted to pastors and other clergy. When no priest is available, deacons as ministers of the word, of the altar, and of charity, preside at the funeral rites. When no priest or deacon is available for the vigil and related rites or the rite of committal, a layperson presides." (*OCF*, 14)**

## VI. THE DISPOSITION OF THE BODY

**FR 11. “The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the deceased be observed.” (CIC, c. 1176 §3)**

“For Catholic Christians, cemeteries, especially Catholic cemeteries, call to mind the resurrection of the dead. In addition, they are the focus for the Church’s remembering of the dead and offering prayer for them.” (OCF, Appendix, 416) The preferred place of burial for Catholics is the Catholic Cemetery. Pastors are to encourage the faithful to be buried in Catholic cemeteries. Catholics should be buried in a place that witnesses the shared faith of our Catholic community.

**FR 12. “The Church’s teaching in regard to the human body as well as the Church’s preference for burial of the body should be a regular part of catechesis on all levels and pastors should make particular efforts to preserve this important teaching.” (OCF, Appendix, 414)**

**FR 13. If, however, due to extraordinary circumstances it is not possible for the body to be present, and cremation has not been chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching, the funeral rites may be celebrated according to the appendix of the Order of Christian Funerals. Those who minister to the family must exercise pastoral sensitivity in guiding the family in making arrangements (see OCF, Appendix, 415).**

**FR 14. “The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the church affirms in those rites.” (OCF, Appendix, 413) Therefore, it is preferred that the body be present during the Funeral Mass, and that cremation occur after the Mass is concluded.**

14.a. “That each diocesan bishop will judge whether it is pastorally appropriate to celebrate the liturgy for the dead, with or without Mass, with the ashes present, taking into account the concrete circumstances in each individual case, and in harmony with the spirit and precise content of the current canonical and liturgical norms.” (OCF, Appendix, 426 b)

14.b. “If the diocesan bishop has decided to allow the celebration of the Funeral Liturgy in the presence of the cremated remains of the deceased person, care must be taken that all is



carried out with due decorum. The cremated remains of the body are to be placed in a worthy vessel. A small table or stand is to be prepared for them at the place normally occupied by the coffin. The vessel containing the cremated remains may be carried to its place in the entrance procession or may be placed on this table or stand sometime before the liturgy begins.” (*OCF*, Appendix, 427)

**FR 15. While the presence of the body at funeral liturgies is preferred, the Archbishop permits pastors in the Archdiocese of Seattle to exercise pastoral judgment to determine if it is appropriate to celebrate the funeral liturgy with cremated remains present.**

**FR 16. Cremated remains are to be treated with the same respect as the body. Cremated remains may not be scattered, subdivided, crafted into jewelry, pottery, or other objects, or kept at home, but are to be buried or placed in a columbarium (see *OCF*, Appendix, 416-417).**

**FR 17. If cremation is to take place, the pastor is to advise that a burial place in a grave or entombment in a mausoleum or columbarium is to be established in advance of celebrating the Funeral Liturgy.**

Pastors should refer to the *OCF* Appendix, “Respect for the Cremated Remains of a Body,” and “The Funeral Liturgy,” Appendix, 416-431.

**FR 18. When a person chooses to donate their body to science, Catholic funeral rites may be celebrated without the body present. Provisions should be made to ensure that remains are returned to the family after the scientific study is concluded so that they may be properly buried. The Rite of Committal is celebrated at that time.**

## VII. FORMATION AND TRAINING

**FR 19. The Pastor is to ensure that proper formation and training have been provided for parish staff regarding Canon Law, Liturgical Law, particular law, and local circumstances, customs, and traditions concerning death and burial. Particular attention is to be paid to training the individual (s) responsible for the initial contact with the family members.**

It is with sensitive respect for the full impact of death in its sadness and grief that the Christian dares to celebrate the funeral liturgy. Without attempting to hide the painful reality of personal loss, the funeral ritual invites all concerned to accept courageously the

death of a loved one, and to become immersed in the Church's liturgy where the Paschal Mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus gives life its fullest meaning. The respect with which we approach the care of the body and the sacredness of its resting place is tied to our belief in the body's now completed human purpose as temple of the Holy Spirit in the world and the promise of our own personal resurrection.

**FR 20. Pastoral leaders are to educate themselves about the range of cultural practices around Christian funerals.**

Taking into account the local traditions, cultural adaptations and situations, Christian funeral rites should express the Paschal character of Christian death and be performed in accordance with the *OCF* and the provisions of this policy.

**FR 21. Pastors are to have a protocol in place for pastorally receiving requests for Catholic funeral rites.**

**FR 22. The date and time of the service is to be decided upon with the family and in consideration of parish schedules. The funeral home should not preemptively determine the date and time of the service.**

Pastors are to work with local funeral homes and cemeteries to make them familiar with Catholic funeral customs.

**FR 23. When conflict among family members regarding planning the funeral occurs, the current spouse, the children, or the executor of the estate should be consulted first. Pastoral sensitivity may be required when dealing with former spouses, estranged family members, or step-families.**

“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.” (*OCF*, 13)

**FR 24. Pastors are to see to it that parishioners are organized to help with the reception, hospitality, and follow-up pastoral care to the mourners on behalf of the entire community. Unexpected deaths may require additional pastoral care and outreach.**

24.a. “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." (*OCF*, 11)

24.b. "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" (Mt 5:3). Each Christian shares in this ministry according to the various gifts and offices in the Church. As part of the pastoral ministry, pastors 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." (*OCF*, 9)

**FR 25. Parishes are to offer their members opportunity to reflect on our church's care for the dead and on preparing for their own funerals, through reflection on such issues as: our church's belief about death, end of life issues, hospice options, choices and procedures of funeral homes/cemeteries, cremation, last will and testament preparation, health care directives.**

## VIII. DONATIONS

**FR 26. Funeral rites may not be refused because of inability to pay. Donation schedules are to be in place at every parish and available upon request. Local and cultural traditions, such as special collections, are to be respected, and decided upon by the pastor.**

## IX. LITURGICAL RITES

**FR 27. The funeral rites are ordinarily to include the Vigil for the Deceased, the Funeral Liturgy (Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy outside of Mass), and the Rite of Committal.**

**FR 28. The OCF adapted by the USCCB and approved by the Holy See in 1989 is the rite to be used by presiders and other liturgical ministers in conducting funeral rites.**

The three separate and sequential rites of the Vigil, Funeral Mass and Committal are the most fitting way to celebrate the pilgrimage of the deceased Christian. Economics and expediency should not prevent full availability and utilization of the rites by the Catholic faithful so that they receive the spiritual and emotional support derived from full and active participation in the Catholic funeral.

**FR 29. The proper names of the various funeral rites are the terms that are to be used in parish publications and obituary notices.**

Vigil of the Deceased

The importance of the vigil needs to be communicated by the pastor to the family of the deceased and the parish community. They need to be aware that the vigil is when “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 a source of faith and hope, as light and life in the face of darkness and death. Consoled by the redeeming word of God, and the abiding presence of Christ and his Spirit, the assembly at the vigil calls upon the Father of mercy to receive the deceased into the kingdom of light and peace.” (*OCF*, “Vigil for the Deceased,” 56)

**FR 30. The Vigil is the most appropriate time for eulogies, lengthy remembrances, and reflections from family members.**

30.a. It is a time to reflect on how the deceased lived a Christian life. Priests, deacons, and pastoral leaders are to be sensitive to cultural practices regarding the Vigil; while the rite is to be followed, local adaptations may take place before or after the Vigil itself. These include the practice of novenas, rosaries, and viewing of the body. The recitation of the rosary is not to take the place of the Vigil liturgy.

30.b. When the body is present at the Vigil, the parish is ordinarily to provide for a secure place to keep the body overnight. The funeral home will assist in determining security and in ensuring that State law is followed.

**FR 31. “When one of its members dies, the Church encourages the celebration of the Mass. But when the Mass cannot be celebrated . . . the second form of the funeral liturgy is used.” (*OCF*, 128)**

- 31.a. “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 of Christ to reaffirm in sign and symbol, word and gesture that each believer through baptism shares in Christ’s death and resurrection and can look to the day when all the elect will be raised up and united in the kingdom of light and peace.” (*OCF*, 129)
- 31.b. Unless the body has been received at the Church at the Vigil, it shall be received at the Funeral Mass at the front door. If the casket was draped with a flag, flowers or other cultural symbols, they are to be removed at this time and replaced with the funeral pall, which recalls the baptismal garment. (see *OCF*, 130-133) “The covering of the cremated remains with a pall is omitted.” (*OCF*, Appendix, 434)
- 31.c. The gestures, music, and symbols used in the Funeral Mass are to be those of the Christian Church (e.g., baptismal pall, crucifix, and the Book of Gospels).

**FR 32. Eulogies are not allowed at the Funeral Mass; a brief remembrance by the person representing the family may be offered prior to the final commendation.**

**FR 33. Pastoral leaders are to be mindful of those persons present who are not Catholic or who no longer practice the Catholic faith and for whom an explanation of the symbols may be necessary.**

Prior to communion the presider may remind those who are not Catholic or who no longer practice the Catholic faith that they may not receive communion. The priest may also choose to invite them to come forward for a blessing.

**FR 34. In cases where a non-Catholic meets the following criteria the Archbishop should be consulted about the reception of Communion:**

- **Their minister is not present;**
- **They believe in the Real Presence, and;**
- **They believe in the Catholic teaching on the Eucharist.**

**FR 35. The Funeral Liturgy outside of Mass may be used:**

- **“When the funeral Mass is not permitted, namely, on solemnities of obligation, on Holy Thursday and the Easter Triduum, and on Sundays of Advent, Lent, and the Easter Season;**
- **When in some places or circumstances it is not possible to celebrate the funeral Mass before the committal, for example, if a priest is not available;**
- **When for pastoral reasons the pastor and the family judge that the funeral liturgy outside Mass is a more suitable form of celebration”(OCF, 178).**

**FR 36. The Rite of Committal is to be celebrated, when practicable, after the funeral liturgy preferably on the same day.**

36.a. The Church prefers that the body or cremated remains of the body be buried and intends that the casket or urn be lowered into the grave or placed in the mausoleum crypt or columbarium niche at the time of committal. Military honors, special songs, and reflections are offered after the committal service is concluded.

36.b. Those gathered for the Funeral Liturgy should be encouraged to gather at the place of committal for the Rite of Committal. The community’s prayer continues and concludes in the Rite of Committal (see *OCF*, 204).

**FR 37. If a priest is not available, a deacon or designated lay person may preside at the Rite of Committal. In Catholic cemeteries, the Director of Cemeteries will appoint qualified ministers to preside in the absence of a priest.**

Committal at Non-Sectarian Cemetery: In the absence of a Catholic presiding minister, the Dean and the appropriate pastor should provide for the training and assignment of ministers to preside at committals.

## X. DOCUMENTATION

See Sacramental Records: SR, V, “Death.”