



*Preparing for a Catholic Funeral*



# *Catholic Burial Traditions*

*PROMOTING A CULTURE OF CATHOLIC BURIAL*

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## *Understanding Catholic Funerals*

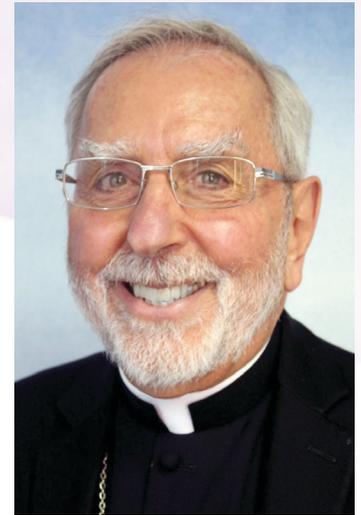
*The Vigil Service • The Church Service  
The Committal Service • Cremation*

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[www.catholicburialtraditions.org](http://www.catholicburialtraditions.org)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ Jesus,

The Catholic Cemetery Conference (CCC) strives to provide information, training, best practices and guidance for Catholic Cemeteries throughout the United States and Canada. CCC's mission is to promote, to educate and to inculcate a culture of Catholic burial. Burying the dead is a Corporal Work of Mercy and an essential part of the Church's mission.



We live in the hope of the resurrection promised by Christ who spoke of the human person as a temple of the Holy Spirit. For that reason care and respect for the deceased matters greatly. The Church strives to assist grieving families in laying their loved ones to rest and provides support and comfort to the family and loved ones of the deceased.

These materials and videos presented by the CCC spell out what that care and respect needs to look like through the whole burial process. From pre-planning for death to the Vigil, to the Funeral Mass and the Rite of Committal, these materials and videos provide information on how Catholic Cemeteries accompany families in this difficult time.

Likewise, lesson plans are presented in order to introduce children and young people to the Rites of Christian Burial, outlining how and why the Church treats the human body in death with the utmost respect and dignity.

The burial or entombment of the deceased person's body or cremated remains is central to the Church's mission. The hope of CCC is that these materials will assist bishops, priests, Catholic cemeterians and pastoral educators to inform our Catholic people of the Church's approach to death and burial of loved ones.

Choicest blessings!

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gerald Kicanas".

Most Rev. Gerald F. Kicanas  
Episcopal Advisor for the Catholic Cemetery Conference  
Bishop Emeritus of the Diocese of Tucson

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**Confraternity of Christian Doctrine** “Scripture Readings for Funerals (taken from the Lectionary for Mass)” – Readings from the Old Testament 1-7; Reading I from the New Testament during the Easter Season 1-4; Reading II from the New Testament 1-15; and Gospel 1-19 are reprinted with permission and subject to the following copyright:

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# UNDERSTANDING CATHOLIC FUNERALS

Nothing affects us more profoundly than our relationships. We have been shaped by our relationships with our parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, aunts, uncles, other relatives, fellow students, teachers, employers, co-workers, neighbors, and acquaintances.

As people of faith, we also have been shaped by our relationships with the members of our parish, other believers, priests, deacons, religious brothers, religious sisters, religious educators and others who minister in the Church. We have been most affected by our relationship with Jesus Christ who has made us part of his Church and sons and daughters of our Father in heaven.

Relationships form us. They shape us. They affect our heart and our spirit. They mold our personality and our view of life. They create ties of affection and love. They form friendships and connections that bind us together.

When someone we love dies, someone with whom we have had a human relationship, “we believe that all the ties of friendship and affection which knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death.” (Order of Christian Funerals, 71) We hold that belief because of our faith in Jesus Christ, who through his death and resurrection conquered the power of sin and death. We believe death is not the end. We believe that life continues, that relationships continue. We affirm that each time we proclaim the profession of faith at Mass. “We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

Because of our belief that life continues, that relationships continue, we believe that our responsibilities to a loved one do not end in death. As Catholics, we fulfill our obligations to the deceased, with whom we remain connected, by lovingly following the rituals of the Church associated with death. In doing so, we proclaim that our relationship with the deceased has not ended and we proclaim our faith in Jesus Christ, who said “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me shall live even in death and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” (John 11:25-26)

## The Order of Christian Funerals

The ceremonies and prayers of the Catholic Church connected with death are found in the Order of Christian Funerals (OCF), the ritual book used by priests and deacons in conducting funeral services. A Catholic funeral ordinarily involves three occasions of prayer that take place over the course of two or three days. In celebrating these moments of prayer we celebrate our faith in Christ, we express our love for the person who has died, and we remain faithful to a human relationship that has touched our life. As we shared part of our loved one’s journey through life, we now share the steps of his or her final journey to God.

The ceremonies and prayers that comprise the funeral ritual are also ways that the Church shows its concern for one of its members. We became part of the family of the Church at our baptism and that relationship is not broken even by death.

The three principal parts of the Catholic funeral liturgy are the vigil service (commonly called the wake service), the church service, and finally the committal service. In these times of prayer, the Christian community accompanies the body of the deceased from the place of the wake, ordinarily the funeral home, to the church building, and then to his/her final resting place. The community of the Church that has accompanied the person in his or her journey through life now walks with him or her from this life to the next. Let us describe each of these parts.

*–continued on next page*

# I. The Vigil Service

The vigil service takes place between the time of death and the time of the church service. The vigil usually takes place in the funeral home during the time of the wake or viewing.

In the vigil service, those who have been affected by the life of the deceased gather to pray for him or her. This is usually the first time since death when those related to the deceased gather together. “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... 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 and death. Consoled by the redeeming word of God and by 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, 56)

The vigil service consists of an opening rite, the reading of God’s word, a homily or reflection, prayers of intercession and a blessing. This service is normally led by a priest or deacon, but if no priest or deacon is available, the vigil service may be conducted by a layperson, such as a pastoral associate from the parish. (OCF, 14)

The vigil begins with Introductory Rites that gather those present into a community of faith ready to hear God’s word and ready to pray for the deceased. The introductory rites include a greeting of those present, an optional song, an invitation to silent prayer for the deceased and a spoken prayer by the leader.

The Liturgy of the Word follows these brief introductory rites. “The proclamation of the word of God is the high point and central focus of the vigil” (OCF, 59) A reading from the Scriptures is proclaimed either by the leader or another person. A responsorial psalm follows this first reading. This psalm may be spoken or sung. A Gospel reading is then proclaimed. Following these readings, a brief homily or reflection is then given on the readings “to help those present find strength and hope in God’s saving word.” (OCF, 61)

Prayers of Intercession follow during which “the community calls upon God to comfort the mourners and to show mercy to the deceased.” (OCF, 62) This part of the vigil service includes a litany, which may be sung, the Lord’s Prayer and a concluding prayer by the leader. At this point, someone may speak in remembrance of the deceased, or this may be done after the vigil service or at another time. The hours of the wake at the funeral home provide many opportunities for such reminiscences.

The vigil service ends with a brief Concluding Rite that includes a blessing that varies on whether it is being given by an ordained minister or by a layperson. This blessing may include the signing of the forehead of the deceased with the sign of the cross. The vigil service may then conclude with a song, a few moments of silent prayer or both.

Besides providing a setting for the vigil service, a wake gives those who have suffered a loss the opportunity to face the death of their loved one, to adjust to a new reality, to find comfort and support in the company of others, to share stories and remembrances of the deceased and to express their sorrow and grief.

# II. The Church Service

The second of the three parts that comprise a Catholic funeral takes place in the church building. This is the place “where the community of faith assembles for worship. The church is the place where the Christian life is begotten in baptism, nourished in the Eucharist, and where the community gathers to commend one of its deceased members to the Father.” (OCF, 131) The funeral Mass is the preferred service in the church and “the central celebration of the Christian community for the deceased.” (OCF, 128)

At a funeral Mass, the casket is received at the church, sprinkled with holy water, and covered with a white cloth. These signs recall baptism, the sacrament that brought the deceased into a relationship with the Christian community. Afterward, readings from the Scriptures and the Liturgy of the Eucharist take place as they normally do at a Sunday Mass. At the end of the funeral Mass, the deceased is commended to God’s mercy and the community expresses its farewell to someone who will no longer gather at its altar table, but whom we pray will be granted a place at God’s heavenly table.

The funeral Mass begins with Introductory Rites that include the reception of the body. The priest goes to the doors of the church where he greets the mourners and receives the body of the deceased. At this time, the casket is sprinkled with holy water and covered with a white pall. These rites recall the sacrament of baptism by which the deceased was raised to a new relationship with God, given the promise of eternal life and made part of God's Church.

After the rites at the doors of the church, the casket is brought forward and placed near the altar. The people follow the casket and take their places in the assembly. During the procession all join in singing an appropriate hymn or psalm. At the conclusion of the song, the opening prayer is then prayed by the priest and all then sit for the Liturgy of the Word. The Liturgy of the Word may follow the model of either a Sunday Mass or a weekday Mass. In other words, "depending on pastoral circumstances, there can be either one or two readings before the Gospel reading." (OCF, 138) The first reading and second reading should be proclaimed by a reader from the parish, by a family member or friend capable of exercising this ministry.

The responsorial psalm that follows the first reading and the acclamation before the Gospel should be sung by a member of the music ministry. After the Gospel is proclaimed by either a priest or a deacon, the homily follows. "A brief homily based on the readings is always given after the Gospel reading at the funeral liturgy...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." (OCF, 27) The general intercessions conclude the Liturgy of the Word. These intercessions may be proclaimed by a deacon, a reader or another person capable of announcing the intentions for which the community is being called to pray.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist then begins and follows the pattern of Sunday Mass. "The community, having been spiritually renewed at the table of God's word, turns for spiritual nourishment to the table of the Eucharist...In partaking of the body of Christ, all are given a foretaste of eternal life in Christ and are united with Christ, with each other, and with all the faithful, living and dead." (OCF, 143)

The Liturgy of the Eucharist includes the presentation of the gifts, the eucharistic prayer and the distribution of holy Communion. At the start of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the gifts of bread and wine may be brought to the altar by relatives and friends of the deceased. It is not appropriate to present items associated with the deceased.

The Final Commendation, which follows the distribution of Holy Communion, brings the funeral Mass to its completion. "The final commendation is a final farewell by the members of the community, an act of respect for one of their members, whom they entrust to the tender mercy and merciful embrace of God. This act of the last farewell also acknowledges the reality of separation and affirms that the community and the deceased, baptized into one Body, share the same destiny, resurrection on the last day." (OCF, 146)

The final commendation, which the priest leads as he stands near the casket, includes an invitation to prayer, a period of silence, the incensing of the casket, the song of farewell, and the prayer of commendation.

Before this final commendation begins, a family member or friend may speak in remembrance of the deceased. (OCF, 170) However, such words of remembrance are strictly optional, and in some places, they are not permitted at this time. Such words of remembrance are not a eulogy, but rather a short prayerful recollection of some aspect of the Christian life of the deceased.

The Procession to the Place of Committal follows the final commendation. The deacon or priest says "In peace, let us take our brother/sister to his/ her place of rest." At this point, the closing song begins and the priest and other ministers lead the casket from the church as the congregation follows. The mourners then accompany the body to its place of final disposition where the rite of committal is celebrated.

On a day when a funeral Mass cannot be celebrated, such as on a holy day of obligation, Holy Thursday, Good Friday or Holy Saturday, the body of the deceased is still brought to the church building. Instead of a Mass, another type of church service is celebrated. This service, which centers on God's word, is similar to a funeral Mass, but it does not include the Liturgy of the Eucharist. In other words, it includes the introductory rites, the Liturgy of the Word, the final commendation and the procession as described above. When this type of service is celebrated, a memorial Mass may and should be celebrated for the deceased at a later date.

### III. The Committal Service

Following the service in the church, the body is brought to its final resting place. Those related to the deceased continue to accompany him or her on this third part of the final journey. The body is transported to the cemetery or the mausoleum where it is committed to its place of rest. In a Catholic cemetery, the body is also committed to the care of the wider Church community that is responsible for the cemetery and for the bodies of the deceased placed within it.

“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 its deceased member.” (OCF, 204) This service is usually led by the priest who has celebrated the funeral Mass. In his absence it may also be led by a deacon, a religious brother or sister, a pastoral minister in the parish, by a friend or family member or by the funeral director. (OCF, 215) The person leading the service should offer the prayers designated by the Church for the rite of committal.

The committal service consists of a short reading from Scripture, a prayer committing the deceased to his or her final resting place and commending the deceased to God in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection, a series of intercessions for the deceased, the Lord’s Prayer, and a blessing.

The committal service begins with an invitation to prayer. Those gathered are invited to pray that the deceased may be welcomed to heaven and that one day they may be reunited with the deceased in the presence of Jesus Christ. This invitation is followed by a Scripture Verse taken from the New Testament.

A Prayer over the Place of Committal follows. This prayer varies, usually depending upon whether the place of committal is a Catholic or non-Catholic cemetery. The Words of Committal then follow as the body is committed to the ground or its place of interment. The actual committal may take place at this time, or at the conclusion of the rite. Intercessions for the deceased now follow. These intercessions may be read by someone other than the priest, deacon or layperson leading the service. After these intercessions, the Lord’s Prayer is prayed. This is followed by a Concluding Prayer and a Prayer over the People. This final prayer varies depending upon whether it is offered by a priest, deacon or by a layperson.

After the prayer over the people, a song may bring the service to an end and a gesture of leave-taking may take place. For example, the mourners may place flowers or soil on the casket.

### Burial, Entombment and Cremation

The final disposition of the body of a deceased Catholic may take place in one of three ways. The body may be buried in the ground, entombed in a mausoleum, or may be cremated and the human remains then interred. While cremation is permitted, the Church clearly prefers that bodies of its members be buried or entombed. “The long-standing practice of burying the body of the deceased in a grave or tomb in imitation of the burial of Jesus’ body continues to be encouraged as a sign of Christian faith. However, owing to contemporary cultural interaction, the practice of cremation has become part of Catholic practice in the United States...” (Reflections on the Body, Cremation, and Catholic Funeral Rites, Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, 1997)

If cremation is chosen as the final disposition of the body, the cremation should take place after the church service and not before since Catholic funeral rites are designed to be celebrated in the presence of the body. After the vigil service and the church service, the body is taken to the crematorium and there a committal service may be celebrated. When the cremated remains or “ashes” are returned to the family, these cremated remains are to be buried in a cemetery or entombed in a mausoleum. The committal service may be repeated at this time. Our reverence for the cremated human remains does not allow them to be scattered, separated or disposed of in any other way.

In other words, if the body of the deceased is to be cremated, the vigil service and the church service take place as described earlier. The family and mourners gather in the presence of the body for the vigil service. At the appropriate time, the body is brought to the church for the church service. After this service, the body is brought to the crematorium.

If the mourners accompany the body to the crematorium, a rite of committal is celebrated there. The mourners then depart, and the body of the deceased is cremated at a later time. Some days later, the cremated remains of the deceased are returned to the family. These cremated remains are then buried in a cemetery or entombed in a mausoleum. When this occurs, the family members and friends gather once more, now to commit the cremated human remains to their final resting place.

## IV. Direct Cremation

For particular reasons, the body of the deceased is sometimes cremated before the preferred funeral rites of the Church. This is called direct or immediate cremation. This might occur, for instance, when a person dies a great distance from home. The family might decide to have the body cremated since shipping cremated remains is not as difficult as transporting a human body. Direct or immediate cremation may also be chosen for health reasons if the person were to die of an infectious disease. It could also be chosen if prolonged severe weather, or some natural disaster, would not allow the usual funeral rituals to take place.

### Services with the Cremated Remains

Since 1997, the Church's Funeral Rites may be celebrated in the presence of the cremated human remains. It is the Church's preference that its funeral rites take place in the presence of the body of the deceased and not in the presence of the cremated remains, "since the presence of the human body better expresses the values that the Church affirms in its rites." (Reflections on the Body, Cremation, and Catholic Funeral Rites, Committee on the Liturgy, NCCB, 1997) Assurance must be given that cremated remains will be properly buried or entombed. If a family indicates that the remains are to be scattered or disposed of in an inappropriate way, the cremated remains may not be present in the church for a funeral liturgy. Scattering is contrary to Catholic teaching that says the cremated human remains should be handled with the same reverence with which we handle a human body.

If the cremated remains are to be present during the funeral rites, those rites take place in the following manner. If there is a wake and the cremated remains have already been returned to the family, the wake should take place in the presence of the cremated remains and the vigil service should be celebrated. "It is appropriate that the cremated remains of the body be present for the full course of the funeral rites, including the Vigil for the Deceased, the Funeral Liturgy, and the Rite of Committal." (Reflections on the Body, Cremation, and Catholic Funeral Rites, Committee on the Liturgy, NCCB, 1997)

The church service takes place in the following way. The urn containing the cremated remains may be carried into the church by a member of the family. The priest, waiting at the doors of the church, greets the people, and then he sprinkles the cremated remains with holy water. Following that, the priest and ministers proceed to the altar. The bearer with the cremated remains walks behind them, and then the mourners follow.

The urn with the cremated remains is placed on a stand in the position normally occupied by the casket. The Easter candle may be placed near the cremated remains. This stand is not intended for mementos or other memorabilia, any more than a casket in a church is a place for such items. The cremated remains are not covered with any type of pall or white cloth. (OCF Appendix, 434) When all have taken their places, the priest goes to the presidential chair where he prays the opening prayer of the funeral liturgy. The rest of the church service takes place as usual.

It should be noted that the cremated remains should be in a dignified urn, and not in the cardboard box, or the plastic or metal shipping container in which they were returned from the crematory. (OCF Appendix, 417) "Care must be taken that all is carried out with due decorum." (OCF Appendix, 427) If the cremated remains are not carried into the church during the service, they are placed on the stand by the Easter Candle before the service begins.

The rite of committal follows the Church service. The Church strongly recommends that a memorial plaque or stone recording the name of the deceased be placed where the cremated remains are buried or entombed. (OCF Appendix, 417)

## A Difference

The celebration of the funeral rites in the presence of the cremated remains should look different and feel different from those celebrated in the presence of a human body. The prayers are slightly altered and the signs and symbols are somewhat different. There should be no attempt to make a funeral liturgy in the presence of the cremated remains look like one celebrated in the presence of a human body. For example, the urn with the cremated remains should not be placed in a casket or in some type of receptacle that brings a casket to mind. The urn should not be carried on a device that allows for the use of pallbearers. An urn with cremated remains is not a casket requiring a carriage or the use of pallbearers. The urn should not be covered with any type of miniature funeral pall.

Again, it should be stressed that the funeral rites taking place in the presence of the cremated human remains address a special or extraordinary situation. The Church wishes to show its compassion to families dealing with immediate or direct cremation, but at the same time, the Church wishes to recommend that its funeral rites take place in their usual sequence, and in the presence of the body of the deceased.

## Reverence

Catholics celebrate the funeral rituals with care and reverence. We do so because we value the body of the deceased. For this was a “body once washed in baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation and fed with the bread of life. This is the body whose hands clothed the poor and embraced the sorrowing.” (Reflections on the Body, Cremation, and Catholic Funeral Rites, Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy, 1997) This is also the body of a person with whom we still have a relationship – the body of a parent, a sibling, a relative, a friend, a neighbor, a fellow Christian. Out of reverence for the human body, for our relationship with the deceased and for Jesus Christ the Lord of Life who conquered death, we celebrate these funeral rituals. For we are a people who believe that relationships, and the obligations and bonds that come with them, continue beyond death!

*Psalm 23 “The Lord is my Shepherd”*





# Preparing for a Catholic Funeral



## Acknowledgments



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