



Liturgical Guidelines for the Celebration of Funerals

Prepared by the
Office of Liturgy of the
Archdiocese of New York

The following guidelines provide a summary of the ecclesial documentation concerning the Church's funeral liturgies. They are also intended to serve as an aid to clergy and others who are involved in the planning and celebration of funeral liturgies within the Archdiocese of New York. It should be noted that these guidelines are primarily liturgical in scope, and they do not address the many canonical and pastoral questions that may arise in the course of pastoral ministry. Such questions may be directed to the appropriate chancery office.

Introduction

The Church confidently proclaims that God created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death that bound humanity... principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead and glorious ascension.

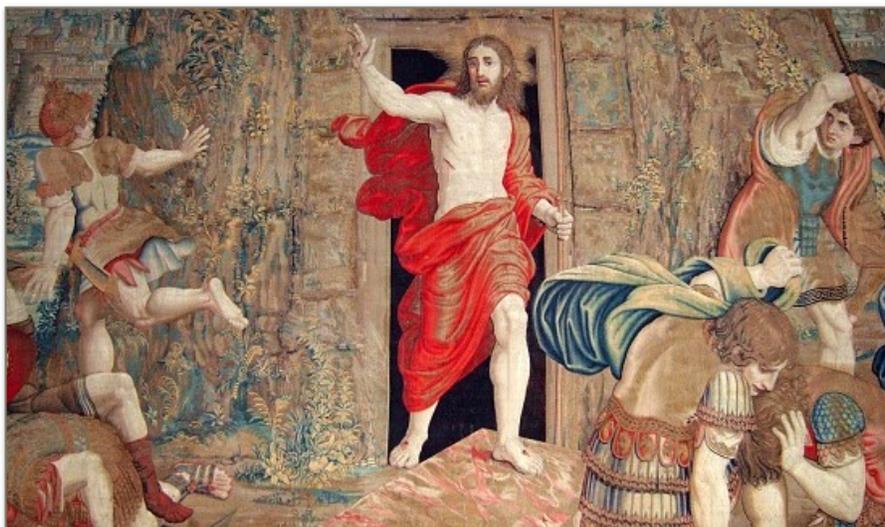
Order of Christian Funerals, 1.

In each of the Church's liturgies, Christ's Paschal Mystery is made present by the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist, men and women are initiated into this Mystery and become members of Christ's Mystical Body. In the life of a Christian, the presence of the Paschal Mystery is ever renewed and sustained through the celebration of the Church's liturgies.

At the death of a Christian, the Church gathers to offer praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of the life now returned to Him. The Church also intercedes on behalf of the deceased in the belief that death is not the end of human existence, nor does it break the bonds forged in life. Recognizing the power of Paschal Mystery, the Church asks that the deceased and all the faithful will have their sins forgiven and be raised in Christ.

In these same rites, the Church ministers to those who mourn the loss of a loved one. Through the proclamation of the saving works of Jesus Christ and the celebration of the Eucharist, the gathered community finds hope in Christ's triumph over death and calls upon the Father of mercy to receive the deceased into the kingdom of light and peace.

In sum, the Church's funeral rites offer prayers for the deceased and provide consolation to the living through the proclamation and celebration of God's saving works and abiding love.



Recipients of the Church's Funeral Rites

Every Catholic is entitled to the Church's ministry at the time of death unless specifically excluded by canon law.¹ As well, the Church's funeral rites may be celebrated for catechumens who are counted among the Christian faithful.

Funeral rites may also be celebrated for a child who dies before Baptism or a stillborn or miscarried child if the parents intended to have the child baptized. The *Order of Christian Funerals* includes special texts to be used at funeral liturgies in these circumstances.²

Within the Archdiocese of New York, the celebration of the Church's funeral liturgies, including the funeral Mass, is also permitted for a deceased baptized non-Catholic when this is not contrary to their will and provided that their own minister is unavailable. This would be appropriate, for example, when a non-Catholic worships regularly in the Catholic Church or identifies with the Catholic Church more than another church or ecclesial community.

Ministry and Participation

Since all the baptized share in Christ's ministry of love and service, all members of the Christian community are called to share in the ministry of consolation.³ Members of the parish community are to be encouraged to care for the dying, to pray for the dead, and to comfort those who are grieving. Regular catechesis through homilies, evenings of reflection, and bulletin inserts should assist



parishioners to understand their role in offering assistance to mourners. As well, pastors should develop parish policies and provide appropriate resources so that the theological meaning and pastoral value of the Catholic funeral rites are clearly known by members of the parish community.

Clergy

With regard to the Church's funeral rites, it is the specific responsibility of the clergy:

- to be present at the side of the dying;
- to teach on the meaning of Christian death;

¹ CIC, 1183-1185.

² *Order of Christian Funerals* [OCF], 234-342.

³ OCF, 9.

- to comfort the family and friends of the deceased and prepare with them a worthy and dignified funeral celebration that has meaning for them; and,
- to ensure that the liturgies for the deceased are integrated into the entire liturgical life of the parish.⁴

The celebration of the funeral rites is especially entrusted to priests. However, when no priest is available, a deacon may lead the funeral liturgies, apart from the funeral Mass. When a priest or deacon is not available to preside at the Vigil or Committal liturgies, a lay member of the parish staff or a parishioner who has the necessary training and skills to lead public prayer may preside at these services, utilizing the appropriate options listed in these rites.⁵

Family

The *Order of Christian Funerals* recommends that family members be involved in the planning of the liturgical rites.⁶ In coordination with the parish priest, the family of the deceased and the funeral director should arrange the places and times for the Vigil, the funeral Mass, and the Committal.

The funeral Mass should normally be the central element of the funeral rites.⁷ If a family is reluctant to schedule a funeral Mass, the parish representative (*e.g.*, priest or deacon) should encourage the offering of a Mass, explaining that it is a powerful prayer for the deceased and a great comfort to the living. Whenever possible, parishes should make provision for the celebration of the funeral Mass when financial considerations on the part of the family would otherwise make this difficult.

Family and friends may be invited to take part in various ministries during the celebration of the liturgy as readers, musicians, ushers, and pallbearers unless they would find these activities too burdensome at a time of grief and loss.⁸

Funeral Directors

Funeral directors should have a working knowledge of the *Order of Christian Funerals*, and pastors should offer assistance to funeral directors with respect to Catholic values, beliefs, and liturgical norms and principles. Parishes and funeral directors should closely collaborate in the planning and celebration of the funeral rites. Annual meetings between funeral directors and the parish staff are encouraged.

⁴ *Ordo exsequiarum*, 25.

⁵ *OCF*, 14.

⁶ *OCF*, 17.

⁷ *OCF*, 154.

⁸ *OCF*, 15.

In obituary notices and announcements, funeral directors should use the proper names of the various liturgical rites, including: “Vigil for the Deceased,” “Funeral Mass” or “Mass of Christian Burial,” “Funeral Liturgy outside Mass,” and “Rite of Committal.”

Liturgical Books

Only approved liturgical books may be used for the celebration of funeral liturgies within the Archdiocese of New York. It should be noted that the 1970 *Rite of Funerals* has been superseded by the 1989 *Order of Christian Funerals*, and that former book should no longer be used.

Cremation

While the Church strongly prefers that the body of the deceased be buried or interred, it also permits cremation, so long as this practice is not chosen for reasons that are contrary to Catholic teaching.⁹ When a body is to be cremated, family members should be informed by the parish priest and the funeral director of the Church's preference that the funeral Mass (or funeral Liturgy outside Mass) be celebrated in the presence of the body prior to cremation.¹⁰ Cremation should then take place after the funeral liturgy and before the Committal.

When the body has been cremated prior to the funeral, a funeral Mass or Liturgy outside of Mass may still be celebrated in the presence of the cremated remains.¹¹ In this case, the appropriate texts in the *Order of Christian Funerals* should be used.¹²

Family members should be reminded that cremated remains are to be buried or entombed in an appropriate container and should not be scattered, kept at home, divided up, or worn as jewelry for any reason.¹³



⁹ *CIC*, 1176 §3.

¹⁰ *OCF*, 411-438.

¹¹ *OCF*, 426.

¹² *OCF*, 432-438.

¹³ *OCF*, 417.

Funeral Rites

Following the ancient tradition of stational liturgies, the Church's funeral rites consist of three rituals which are usually celebrated in distinct locations. These are: the Vigil (or “Wake Service”), the funeral Mass (or funeral Liturgy outside Mass), and the Committal (or “Burial Service”). In their celebration of these rites, the Christian community typically moves from the funeral parlor to the church, and finally, to the place of burial or reposition. This movement from station to station is intended to mirror a Christian’s journey from this life to the heavenly Jerusalem.¹⁴

The Vigil

The Vigil is a brief service consisting of one or more Scripture readings and prayers for the deceased and the mourners. This liturgy usually takes place during the calling hours at a funeral home during the days before the funeral Mass. The purpose of this service is not only to commend the deceased to God, but also to support the mourners in their hope of eternal life.

The Vigil usually takes the form of the *Vigil for the Deceased* as given in the *Order of Christian Funerals*.¹⁵ This liturgy may be simplified or shortened, as circumstances dictate.¹⁶ Alternatively, some part of the Office of the Dead may be celebrated at the Vigil service, except on solemnities, the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and Easter, Ash Wednesday, Holy Week, the octave of Easter, and All Souls’ Day.¹⁷ Additional services or prayers, including the recitation of the Rosary or other acts of piety and devotion may supplement the Vigil liturgy, but should not replace it.

The Vigil may take place either in the home of the deceased or in a funeral home.¹⁸ It may also be conducted in a church. In this lattermost case, the *Vigil for the Deceased with Reception at the Church* should be celebrated, but at a time well before the funeral liturgy itself.¹⁹

In the Archdiocese of New York, the proper vesture for clergy who preside at the Vigil is a stole worn over either a clerical suit, an alb, or a cassock and surplice. When the Vigil is celebrated in a church, the presiding priest or deacon should wear an alb or cassock and

¹⁴ OCF, 42.

¹⁵ OCF, 54-81.

¹⁶ OCF, 55.

¹⁷ OCF, 348; *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours*, 245.

¹⁸ OCF, 55.

¹⁹ OCF, 82-97.

surplice with a stole. In the case of a layperson or religious presiding at the Vigil, he or she should be dressed in a dignified manner which befits their service.

Those who lead the Vigil should encourage the participation of those present, with due pastoral sensitivity given to those who are mourning. Printed programs may be distributed to assist in this participation. The use of music at the Vigil is encouraged and can be helpful in leading the people in prayer, particularly in the singing of an opening song and the Responsorial Psalm.²⁰

Funeral Mass

The funeral Mass (or funeral Liturgy outside Mass) is the central celebration of the Christian community on behalf of the deceased. In this 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.”²¹

Terminology

It is appropriate to refer to the Mass which is offered in the presence of the body of the deceased as either the “Funeral Mass” or the “Mass of Christian Burial.” The funeral Mass should not be designated as a “Mass of the Resurrection,” since this term refers specifically to the celebration of the Easter Vigil.

Time and Location

Parishes should develop clear guidelines for scheduling funerals, and this information should be shared with parishioners and local funeral directors. When developing these policies, pastors should take into account the schedule of daily parish Masses, the availability and number of priests, the scheduling of liturgies and other parish events, and the requests of those who mourn. Bearing in mind these considerations, it should be noted that it may not always be possible to schedule a funeral Mass on a day or at a time of the family’s preference.

The funeral Mass may be celebrated as one of the regularly scheduled daily Masses in the parish. However, if a Mass intention has already been scheduled, a funeral Mass may not be substituted for a daily Mass without the consent or prior understanding of the person who has requested the announced Mass.

Funeral Masses are not to be celebrated on solemnities of obligation, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday, or on the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and the Easter

²⁰ OCF, 68.

²¹ OCF, 129.

Season.²² On these days or other occasions when the Funeral Mass may not take place, a funeral Liturgy outside Mass (see below) may be celebrated.

The funeral Mass is generally celebrated in the parish church to which the deceased belonged. However, the funeral Mass may also be celebrated at another church with the pastor's consent and when the pastor of the deceased has been notified.²³ Funeral Masses for religious should ordinarily be celebrated in the community's church, chapel, or oratory. The celebration of the funeral Mass is permitted in the chapels of Catholic long-term care institutions.

Funeral Liturgy Outside Mass

As noted above, a funeral Liturgy outside Mass is ordinarily celebrated on those days when a funeral Mass is not permitted. The funeral Liturgy outside Mass should not be substituted for the funeral Mass when the celebration of a Mass is possible unless, for pastoral reasons, the pastor and family judge this to be a more suitable form of celebration.²⁴

A funeral Liturgy outside Mass may take place at a parish church, a funeral home, the home of the deceased, or a cemetery chapel. The celebration of this liturgy should include Scriptural readings, the use of music, and, if appropriate, the participation of family and friends.

Liturgical Options

Presiding clergy should be familiar with the wide choices of prayers for different circumstances contained in the *Order of Christian Funerals* and carefully select the most appropriate of these texts in light of the particular circumstances of the funeral.²⁵

Family members may be invited to select scriptural texts that will be used at the funeral Mass from those listed in Part III of the *Order of Christian Funerals* or from the *Lectionary*, Volume IV, nos. 1011-1026. Non-biblical texts may never replace the scriptural readings or the Responsorial Psalm.²⁶

Family members may also wish to select or request specific musical selections for the celebration of the funeral Mass. These selections should be examples of sacred music and express the Church's beliefs concerning Christ's victory over death and the hope of eternal life. Additional information concerning the selection of music for funerals may be found in the archdiocesan *Guidelines for Music at Funerals*.

²² OCF, 178.

²³ CIC, 1177.

²⁴ OCF, 154; 178.

²⁵ See: OCF, Part V, Chapter 20.

²⁶ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [GIRM], 57; OCF, 23.

In consideration of the pastoral needs of the mourners, vestments should be chosen so as “to express Christian hope but should not be offensive to human grief or sorrow.”²⁷ In the United States, white, violet, or black vestments may be worn at the funeral and other offices and Masses for the dead.

Particular Elements of the Funeral Liturgy

Reception of the Body and Introductory Rites

The Rite of Reception of the body ordinarily takes place at the entrance of the church.²⁸ For reasons of space, this rite may also take place inside the church. Flags or insignia of associations to which the deceased belonged should be removed from the coffin at the entrance of the church and may be replaced after the conclusion of the funeral rite.²⁹

Holy water is used at the reception of the body as a reminder of the Baptism of the deceased.³⁰ After the sprinkling of holy water, the casket may be covered with a funeral pall in remembrance of the white baptismal garment.

Following the Rite of Reception of the body, a procession into the church takes place. Symbols of the Christian life, such as a Book of the Gospels, a bible, or a cross, may be carried in procession and then placed on the coffin.³¹ The Easter candle may also be placed beforehand near the place where the coffin will remain during the liturgy. When arriving at the sanctuary, the celebrant may incense the altar before going to the chair.³² The Penitential Rite and *Kyrie* are omitted, and the Mass proceeds directly to the opening collect.

If the Rite of Reception of the body has already taken place at a time prior to the funeral Mass, the Mass begins in the usual way with the sign of the cross and the Penitential Act.³³

Liturgy of the Word

Readings

Depending on pastoral circumstances, there may be one or two readings before the reading of

²⁷ OCF, 39.

²⁸ OCF, 133.

²⁹ OCF, 132.

³⁰ OCF, 133.

³¹ OCF, 163.

³² OCF, 163.

³³ OCF, 158.

the Gospel.³⁴ Family members or friends of the deceased may be invited to proclaim these readings. Readers should ordinarily have prior experience as lectors and be able to proclaim the Word of God with clarity and dignity. In this way, their ministry can serve as an effective aid in bringing the wisdom and hope of God's Word to those who mourn. If there are no qualified lectors among family or friends, the readings may be proclaimed by a parish lector, a deacon, a concelebrant, or, if necessary, the celebrant.³⁵

Responsorial Psalm

The Responsorial Psalm should ordinarily be sung, if possible, with a cantor leading the congregation in the sung response. Songs or hymns may not be used in place of the Responsorial Psalm.³⁶

Homily

The homily at the funeral Mass should be based on the readings that have been proclaimed. It should be brief and “dwell on God's compassionate love and on the paschal mystery of the Lord as proclaimed in the Scripture readings.”³⁷ The homily should never be in the style of a eulogy, but rather, inspire those gathered to find hope in the gift of eternal life and to assist the deceased with the help of their prayers.³⁸ Bearing in mind that he is a minister of Christ's Gospel for all, the homilist should also take into account the presence of those who may be non-Catholics or Catholics who rarely participate in the Eucharist.³⁹

Universal Prayer

The petitions of the Universal Prayer may be recited by a family member or friend of the deceased at the discretion of the celebrant. The Universal Prayer should be recited from a prepared text. The formulas provided in the *Order of Christian Funerals* may be adapted to the circumstances of a particular funeral, or other petitions may be composed.⁴⁰

Liturgy of the Eucharist

Preparation of the Gifts

During the Preparation of the Gifts, family members and friends may be invited to present the bread and wine or other gifts for the poor or the Church.⁴¹ It is customary in the Archdiocese of New York to perform an incensation of the gifts and the altar during the Preparation of the

³⁴ OCF, 165.

³⁵ Cf. Archdiocese of New York Guidelines for Lectors.

³⁶ GIRM, 61.

³⁷ OCF, 141.

³⁸ OCF, 141; GIRM, 382.

³⁹ GIRM, 385.

⁴⁰ OCF, 142.

⁴¹ GIRM, 73.

Gifts within the funeral Mass.⁴² The body of the deceased should not be incensed during the Preparation of the Gifts.

Eucharistic Prayer

The Preface and Eucharistic Prayer may be recited or sung. It should be noted that Eucharistic Prayers I, II, and III include an option to pray for the deceased by name. For this reason, their use is especially appropriate at funeral Masses.⁴³ In the case of a funeral Mass that is celebrated for a non-Catholic Christian, the name of the deceased should not be included in the Eucharistic Prayer.⁴⁴

Communion Rite

Inasmuch as many who are present at a funeral Mass may not be Catholic, a celebrant may wish to offer a brief invitation to those who will receive Holy Communion in these or similar words: "At this time, we invite those Catholics who are spiritually prepared to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion."⁴⁵

Words of Remembrance

During the time of the celebration of the funeral rites, family members and friends often wish to speak in remembrance of the deceased. These addresses are most appropriately given at the wake, the closing of the casket (either at the funeral parlor, or at the parish prior to the start of the Funeral Mass), or the graveside. At the pastor's discretion, words of remembrance may also be given during the funeral Mass following the Prayer after Communion.⁴⁶

When words of remembrance are included within the funeral Mass, they should not take the form of a eulogy or general remembrance of the deceased, but rather, focus on the deceased's journey of faith and Christian virtues. As well, this address should:

- rarely include more than one speaker;
- be brief, lasting not more than 5 minutes;
- be written out;
- be given, not at the ambo, but from another suitable place;
- express Christian values and a belief in the hope of eternal life; and,
- avoid any expression that would not be appropriate within the context of prayer.

Parishes are encouraged to develop clear guidelines for words of remembrance and share this information with families during the planning of the funeral liturgies.

⁴² OCF, 144.

⁴³ GIRM, 365.

⁴⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "On Public Mass for Deceased Non-Catholic Christians," June 11, 1976.

⁴⁵ See: *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 83-84.

⁴⁶ OCF, 170.

Final Commendation and Farewell

At the final commendation, the members of the community entrust their loved one to the merciful embrace of God.⁴⁷ During this rite, the body may be sprinkled with holy water, if this has not occurred at the beginning of the funeral Mass. The body may also be incensed at this time as a sign of respect for the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸

The Song of Farewell is the climax of the rite of final commendation. In addition to the selections given in the *Order of Christian Funerals*, this Song may also take the form of a responsory or hymn.

As the procession with the body leaves the church, it is customary in the Archdiocese of New York to sprinkle the body with holy water once the funeral pall has been removed.⁴⁹

Rite of Committal

The Rite of Committal is a gathering of the faithful at the time of the interment of the body of the deceased. This rite should normally be celebrated at the graveside or place of interment. However, it may also take place at a cemetery chapel, if necessary.⁵⁰

The Rite of Committal offers several optional texts which take into account whether the grave or place of interment has already been blessed, as well as situations when the final disposition of the body will take place at a later time. These texts should be chosen carefully in light of the particular circumstances of the funeral. When a funeral Mass (or Liturgy outside Mass) has not taken place prior to the interment of the body, the “Rite of Committal with Final Commendation” should be celebrated.⁵¹

In the Archdiocese of New York, the proper vesture for clergy who preside at the Committal is a stole worn over either a clerical suit, an alb, or a cassock and surplice. Laypersons or religious presiding at the Committal should be dressed in an appropriate and dignified manner.

The use of music is encouraged at the Committal service. In particular, a hymn or liturgical song which speaks of God’s love and mercy is recommended at the conclusion of the rite.⁵²

⁴⁷ OCF, 146.

⁴⁸ OCF, 147.

⁴⁹ See: OCF, 173.

⁵⁰ OCF, 204.

⁵¹ OCF, 205.

⁵² OCF, 214.

Military services, words of remembrance, gestures of leave-taking, and other rites and customs may either precede or follow the Rite of Committal but should remain distinct from the liturgical celebration of the rite. Such rites or customs are typically coordinated with the celebrant of the rite by the funeral director.

Additional Considerations

Memorial Masses

It is a time-honored custom to celebrate a “Memorial Mass” after the burial of the deceased and at a time removed from the immediate passing, such as on the anniversary of death. Parishes should be generous in making this option available to family members and friends during the months and years following the celebration of the funeral liturgies. It should be noted that a Mass on the first anniversary of death may be celebrated on weekdays of Advent, during the Christmas Octave, on weekdays of Lent, on Obligatory Memorials, on weekdays of the Easter season, and on weekdays in Ordinary Time. A daily Mass for the Dead may also be celebrated on weekdays in Ordinary Time.⁵³

Continued Ministry

Clergy, pastoral staff, and the parish community are encouraged to provide support and consolation to the family and friends of the deceased in the months and years following the celebration of the funeral liturgies. This support can take a variety of forms, including the celebration of Memorial Masses, a parish bereavement support group, the inscription and display of a Book of the Deceased prior to the annual celebration of All Souls’ day and during the month of November, and through simple expressions of presence and prayer to those who continue to grieve. In these and other ways, the faith of the Christian community in the resurrection of the dead can bring support and strength to those who suffer the loss of those whom they love while building closer ties amongst the Christian faithful.

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⁵³ *GIRM*, 380; *Ceremonial of Bishops*, Appendix III.