



the DIOCESE of
EAST ANGLIA

Preparing a Catholic Funeral

Introduction

The death of someone we love will affect each of us in different ways. Our feelings may change from day to day, but one of the practicalities we have to face is the planning of a funeral. The person who has died may have left quite specific instructions about this, or we may find it is all down to us. We may have a clear idea of what to do, or we might be confused. We might have been involved in planning a funeral before, or it may be the first time. We want to honour and respect the wishes of our deceased relative or friend, but we, and others, also have needs.

The Church is there for you at this time, whether or not it features in your life at present, and you should be able to find help and support wherever you stand in relation to faith, at a personal and at a practical level. The diverse nature of our communities means that there will be a wide range of cultural and personal backgrounds, which will shape people's requests. Mindful of all these factors, we must also be faithful to our own tradition of proclaiming God's mercy and forgiveness and the hope of resurrection to eternal life, but we will always try to respond to the needs of a family in their time of grief. This simple guide has been prepared to answer some of your questions.

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Bishop of East Anglia

1. What is a Christian Funeral?

The Order of Christian Funerals is the book we use in the Catholic Church for the celebration of our funerals. In the introduction to the book three aspects of a funeral are highlighted.

We gather to thank and praise God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to him. The Funeral Mass, the memorial of our Lord's own death and resurrection, is the principal way in which we celebrate a funeral. There may be circumstances, however, where, for various reasons a funeral liturgy (service) without mass is more appropriate. This is something to discuss with the priest or deacon in your local parish. They should be able to help you plan the funeral liturgy.

We commend the person who has died to God's mercy, praying for the forgiveness of their sins, and expressing our confident hope that we will all meet again in Christ. That person's life on earth has come to an end, and though physically separated from them, we believe, in the words of the funeral liturgy, 'that all the ties of friendship and affection which knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death.'

The funeral is also there to bring hope and consolation to those who are bereaved, by proclaiming God's mercy for everyone, and expressing our belief in the resurrection to new life.

The funeral is seen in terms of a journey – for the deceased, from their own home (or funeral home) to church and thence to the cemetery or crematorium, and for the mourners in terms of the process of taking leave of a loved one, marked by several stages.

2. Where do we start?

You will need to check whether the person who has died had a pre-paid funeral plan, which will set out what has already been agreed and paid for. But, otherwise, the choice of the funeral director is down to family or friends. That choice will depend on previous experience, recommendation, or knowledge of different firms. It is quite in order for you to ask for estimates of costs before making a final decision.

Generally speaking, cremation is cheaper than burial. Many local authorities have a set charge throughout their district, and there will also be the matter

14. If a baby is stillborn or if the mother has suffered a miscarriage, does the Church offer any funeral rite?

Yes, a short and simple 'Rite of Final Commendation for an Infant' is provided as a time of prayer with the parents, and is celebrated to give them comfort and to commend and entrust the infant to God. It is provided in a model form and can be adapted to suit the circumstances.

15. Apart from the Funeral Mass or Service without Mass, are there any other occasions for gathering in prayer?

The Order of Christian Funerals provides several opportunities for prayer before the funeral. In addition to short and simple opportunities for prayer immediately after death or when the family gather in the funeral chapel of rest, the principal occasion would normally be the afternoon or evening before the funeral when a vigil may be held, either in church with the reception of the body, or at home. This is a chance for people to gather in prayer in a quieter and more reflective setting.

The custom of bringing the body into church is a long-standing tradition – resting overnight marks a readiness for the final part of the journey.

11. Is it in order for someone to give a tribute?

Yes, but we're quite careful about the words we use and the form this takes. Our funeral book refers to 'words in remembrance of the deceased.' It is really a wonderful opportunity to speak about the part that faith played in their life, and that includes, not only deeply held convictions, but also uncertainties and questions.

It is important to remember that the reception which follows the funeral may be the best time for story-telling, or for a biographical style outline of their life. If words are to be spoken during the funeral service, it is important that they are written down, so that the task, if necessary, can be shared by more than one person. Increasingly, the words in remembrance are spoken at the beginning of the funeral Mass, or they may take place just before the Commendation and Farewell at the end. Prior to the day, you should show the priest or deacon officiating at the funeral, a copy of the text.

12. May anything be placed on the coffin?

Provision is made for symbols of the Christian life of the deceased person – e.g. bible, prayer book, crucifix or rosary beads – to be placed on the coffin at the beginning of the funeral liturgy. Family members are often invited to do this. A photograph of the person may be placed on a table or stand near the coffin. In many churches a white pall (cover) is placed over the coffin – a reminder that the deceased was clothed in a white robe at baptism.

13. If cremation has taken place, what provision is made for the burial of ashes?

Sadly, a large proportion of ashes remain unclaimed, but the best conclusion to the funeral liturgy is the burial of ashes in a grave. For ashes, as for bodies, it is a sign of our hope in the resurrection, and for this reason the ashes should not be scattered. The grave is a sign, not only of Christ's death and burial, but also of his resurrection on the third day. Sometimes cremation may take place before the funeral, and the casket of ashes is brought to the church and buried immediately afterwards. On other occasions, when cremation follows the funeral liturgy, the ashes can be buried at a later date.

of the upkeep of the grave to consider. Green or woodland burial grounds are becoming increasingly popular as an alternative to a cemetery or churchyard with headstones. They will each have their own way of memorialising and marking the graves. And for those who choose cremation, there is an option in some churches for the burial of ashes in the church grounds or in a columbarium (a place where urns holding cremated remains can be safely and respectfully placed)

The funeral director will advise you of the costs involved, which include those connected with the church – organists or musicians, and an offering to the parish for the services of a minister. These will normally be included in the funeral director's account, but you are free to make your own arrangements.

3. Where will the funeral take place?

If there is to be a Funeral Mass it will normally be in the church or a chapel in the parish.

4. What form should the funeral liturgy take?

You will find that the word 'liturgy' is often used. If it's not one that's familiar to you, it refers to whatever form the funeral takes – Mass or a funeral service without Mass.

The family of someone who has died will always want to carry out the wishes of the person they love, especially if they have been expressed clearly. Mass would be the norm for most Catholics who have died, not only because it is appropriate, but also because it is familiar. Even for those who are *not* familiar with the celebration of Mass, the experience can be powerful and positive and touch the hearts of many by its affirmation of a life destined for union with Christ. His undying love brought him to the cross – to death and resurrection - giving us the hope and promise of eternal life, and of meeting again 'those whom we have loved long since and lost awhile'

However, for a number of reasons, a shorter liturgy, involving prayers, readings, and hymns may, on occasions, be the appropriate form of celebration. Whatever form is chosen, it is important that, as far as possible, a funeral should include rather than exclude those present. If Mass is not part of the funeral liturgy, the local Catholic community can still have another occasion when it can be offered for the deceased person.

5. Is provision made for a funeral that takes place only at a crematorium or cemetery chapel?

Yes, if there is not going to be a funeral mass, there is a form of service that can be used in its entirety at a crematorium or in a cemetery chapel, immediately prior to the committal of the body for cremation or burial. This is something which you can discuss with the priest, deacon or parish representative.

6. When will the funeral take place?

This will depend on a number of factors. The funeral director will liaise with the family, the local parish and the cemetery or crematorium. Remember that nothing can be finalised until the death has been registered, though it is always advisable to contact the funeral director soon after the death, in order that provisional dates and times can be pencilled in. If a post mortem or an inquest is to be carried out, this may result in a delay. Whenever possible, it is good to make contact with, and talk to the priest before finalising details with the funeral director.

7. How will we know what is the best thing to do?

Talk to the priest or deacon or member of the parish who will be involved in the funeral. They should be able to help you make the right decision with wise guidance and sensitive listening. Don't be afraid to ask for guidance, especially if you are not familiar with the customs and practices of the Catholic Church.

8. What choices do we have in planning the funeral Liturgy?

Whatever form of funeral you decide upon, it is important that those who will be at the funeral will have an order of service giving them everything that they need by way of texts and responses. That doesn't mean that every word needs to be printed. There will be times, for example, when someone is reading a passage of scripture. This is the sort of moment when listening to, rather than looking at a text, is appropriate. Many parishes have a helpful template that can be offered to those planning the funeral liturgy. Before printing, you should check with your local parish about acknowledgements for copyrighted material and mention of any music licences it may have.

9. Readings:

You will be able to choose from a wide selection of scripture readings, which can be found in funeral planning books or on-line.

The Liturgy Office of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales provides a guide to help you in your choice of readings, in the form of a downloadable pdf; each of the possible readings and psalms can also be downloaded for printing.

To access the relevant section of the website go to:

liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/OCF/Lectinary.shtml

At the heading 'Lectinary' (the book used which contains the scripture readings), go to the two sub-headings 'Lectinary readings for funerals' and 'Choosing the readings' and click for the relevant information.

Members of the family or friends may also like to do a reading or prepare and read intercessions during the funeral. You can ask for help with this task.

What about non-biblical readings?

These have their place, especially if they were of significance to the deceased. But they cannot take the place of the scripture readings, and once again may be better suited to the reception, or the crematorium, or at the same time as the words in remembrance.

10. Music:

The choice of music also is something in which you can be involved. It is important to use hymns, songs and chants which are appropriate, rather than simply a selection of music which was liked by the deceased.

As music is such a personal thing, it may cause distress if the choice of a popular song from a CD is politely declined. But it is important to preserve the Christian character of the funeral.

There are opportunities for music which may be more suitable at the reception after the funeral. The publication of the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales makes this helpful comment in *'Into your hands'*:

'The music at funerals should help to create a spirit of hope in Christ's victory over death and in the Christian's share in that victory.....If you are thinking of including a piece of non-religious music, please ensure that it is in harmony with our faith in the Lord's death and resurrection and will contribute to the atmosphere of Christian worship'.