

THE CATHOLIC FUNERAL MASS:

Understanding Symbols and Actions

We Christians find bright rays of hope in the midst of our many tears when a loved one dies. We believe that death is not only an end, but also a beginning; that our loved one has passed through death from this present, temporary life to a perfect, permanent one; that he or she who saw God in faith on earth now sees the Lord face to face in heaven; and that while death separates us now, it is for a short time only.

The Funeral Mass is celebrated so that we might express our faith in Christ's victory over death and our personal share in his resurrection. It does so through prayers and blessings, through songs and readings, through ritual actions and rich symbols. A few words of explanation about some of these may make the Funeral Mass more understandable and more comforting for you.

1) Music

Perhaps more than anything else in worship, music affects our feelings and the atmosphere in which we pray. It helps us express our sorrow, our gratitude, and our enduring faith. Rather than funeral songs that might be overly sentimental, the music and hymns at a Catholic funeral are often characterized by a more uplifting, even joyful, tone. We sing hymns that praise the goodness of God, express our hope in Christ's Resurrection, communicate our fervent prayers for our deceased loved one, and acknowledge our need for courage and comfort in our time of sorrow and difficult transition.

2) Color of the Priest's Vestments

We normally associate the color white with Easter, weddings, Baptisms and other events of joy, happiness, victory, and purity of heart. Since we are not merely grieving over losing a loved one, but celebrating his or her life here with us and now in heaven, the clergy generally wear white vestments at Catholic funerals as well. However, violet and black vestments are also permitted.

3) Processions

Usually, a Funeral Mass is punctuated with four distinct processions: the entrance, offertory, communion, and recessional. In many places, there are also processions (in vehicles) from the funeral home to the church and from the church to the cemetery. These actions – particularly the entrance procession and the procession at the end of Mass – reflect “the journey of human life as a pilgrimage to God's kingdom of peace

and light, the new and eternal Jerusalem" (*Order of Christian Funerals*, #148). These processions are most meaningful when accompanied by music and singing and help to strengthen the bonds of unity among the gathered participants and with the deceased.

4) Sprinkling with Holy Water

Christians first share in the resurrection of the Lord through the Sacrament of Baptism when we are immersed in the baptismal waters or have the saving water poured over us. Baptism made your loved one a Christian and washed away the power of original sin in his or her life. During the Funeral Mass, the body of your loved one will be sprinkled once more with holy water, helping all gathered to recall that initial washing in Baptism and the promise of eternal life that is now being fulfilled.

5) Placing of the Pall

A funeral pall, a large white cloth, will be draped over the casket at the very beginning of the liturgy when your loved one's body is received or welcomed into the church building. The pall mirrors for us the white garment given at Baptism and therefore symbolizes our life in Christ. As mentioned above in relation to the color of vestments, white represents joy, victory, and purity of heart. Family members or friends are encouraged to drape the pall, although the priest or other ministers from the parish may do this for you.

6) The Easter or Paschal Candle

For the fifty days of the Easter season, the large paschal candle (or Easter candle) stands in the sanctuary of our churches. It is also present for the celebration of Baptisms and again at funerals. This great candle symbolizes the risen Christ and reminds us that he has conquered sin and death and now lives in our midst, bringing light to a world desperately in need of it. In the Catholic Funeral Mass we carry the paschal candle in the entrance procession or place it near the casket as a reminder that the deceased, through his or her death, now shares in a new way the victory of Christ over the powers of darkness. It harkens back to the celebration of Baptism, when your loved one was presented a lighted candle and urged to bring the light of Christ to the world.

7) Symbol of the Christian Life

A symbol of the Christian life may be carried in the entrance procession by a family member or friend and placed on the casket once it is placed before the altar. This may be a bible or book of the Gospels that reminds us that we live by the Word of God and that fidelity to it leads us to eternal life. It might also be a cross, recalling that your loved one was signed with the cross in Baptism and through Jesus' suffering on the

cross is brought to the victory of his resurrection. The priest may recite a prayer to accompany the placing of this symbol on the casket.

8) Bible Readings

Among the many resources open to you as you help plan the Funeral Mass are many Bible readings. These appear in the *Through Death to Life* booklet beginning on page 25. You may select three: one from the Old Testament, one from the letters (epistles) of the New Testament, and one from the gospels. Or you may select just two: one from either the Old or New Testament and one from the gospels. You may also be asked to choose a Responsorial Psalm, which is usually sung by a parish vocalist. The priest or other parish leader can help you determine which option is most appropriate for your particular circumstance or what is customary at the parish where the funeral will be celebrated.

God speaks to us through these readings and through their proclamation, the silences and sung responses that follow them, the homily, and the general intercessions; we voice our responses to his Word.

9) The Homily and Family Remarks

The presiding priest or a deacon will give a brief homily based on your choice of readings. While this is not a eulogy, the homilist will find it helpful to speak with you about the deceased's life so he can better integrate the message of the readings and your thoughts and feelings about your loved one into the homily.

Following the Prayer after Communion and before the Final Commendation, a family member or friend may speak in remembrance of the deceased. This is an occasion to acknowledge some of the ways in which the departed has inspired and helped to enrich the lives and deepen the faith of those he or she knew in this world.

10) Incensing of the Body

As Christians, we believe the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and will one day be resurrected by God's mighty power. During the Funeral Mass, the priest walks around the casket and incenses the body as a sign of our respect for the remains. Incense is also a symbol of the community's prayers for the deceased rising to the throne of God, and of our final farewell and commendation to the mercy of God of this departed loved one.

11) Bread and Wine-Body and Blood

Receiving Communion is the most perfect way to share in the Funeral Mass and the Church encourages all who are able to do so. While we receive the fullness of Christ under the form of bread alone, it is a more perfect sign that we truly partake of the

Lord's presence when we receive Communion from the chalice as well. The words of Jesus in John's gospel have great meaning here: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal, and I will raise him on the last day" (Jn 6:54).

12) Final Commendation and Committal

The last ritual action of the funeral liturgy is called the Final Commendation and Farewell. In many ways, this is the most difficult time, for it is a goodbye to one we have loved through life. But, again, the support of friends and the comfort of faith tell us that his goodbye both is, and is not final. It is a separation, yes, but only a temporary one. This simple rite includes an introduction by the priest, silent prayer, a sprinkling and incensing of the body, a song of farewell, and a closing prayer.

A procession then accompanies the body to the place of burial, internment, or cremation where a final brief rite is celebrated, called the Rite of Committal. Through this rite we commend our loved one to his or her final resting place and once more pray for all those who have died and for ourselves as we continue our pilgrimage here on earth.

13) Reconciliation

People who are alienated from God, the Church, family members, or others often are touched by the experience of death and wish to become reconciled with one another and with God. The parish priest will be happy to assist in that process even to the extent of offering an opportunity for the Sacrament of Penance (or Reconciliation) during, for example, calling hours beforehand at the funeral home or church. If you think this would be helpful, contact the local priest in advance so he can make the needed arrangements.

14) Personalized Memorial Cards and Participation Booklets

If you have the time and the desire, you may wish to prepare individualized memorial cards to be handed out at the Funeral Mass or cemetery. Worship aids or participation booklets will help people celebrate the liturgy more fully. Putting these together takes some effort and involves a bit of a rush, but the priest, his staff, or the funeral director should be able to offer guidance. Creating these can also become a wonderful way for friends or family beyond the immediate circle to help ease the burden of the difficult days surrounding the death of a loved one.

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