

National Centre for Liturgy

Celebrating a Catholic Funeral

The Order of Christian Funerals, the book we have used at funerals since Easter 1992, offers much pastoral guidance on the celebration of funerals. Such guidance is based on what we believe a Catholic funeral to be. This statement by the Episcopal Commission for Liturgy and the Irish Commission for Liturgy emphasises our understanding of celebrating a Catholic Funeral. It was issued in November 2003.

Lord for those who believe in your love death is not the end.

The death of a Christian is not the end of life, but rather a transformation in an outward journey towards eternal life with God. We believe that this call to eternal life begins for all Christians in the waters of baptism. Nevertheless for those family and friends who are bereaved there is sadness in parting, and death when it comes, even when it has been expected, such as after a long illness, always leaves a sense of loss and shock. The Catholic Church has over many centuries developed a rich tradition in its liturgy for funerals. This liturgy seeks to balance the need to console those who are mourning with the hope in the person of Christ who is our “life and our resurrection”. The Catholic funeral rites commend the deceased to the mercy of God, and as we give thanks to God for the life of a Christian we pray that God may forgive whatever sins the deceased may have committed through human weakness.

By a series of services the *Order of Christian Funerals* – the book we use at funerals provides a means by which with prayer the local church community may support the personal grief of a family from the time of the death of a loved one to the final committal at the graveside by a series of services. Some of these prayers are celebrated in the intimacy of the home, while others are intended as public worship in a church. The funeral rites thus present a balance between sharing with the personal grief of the family and the celebration of the public liturgy of the Church.

The ties of friendship and affection do not unravel with death

In Ireland there is a strong tradition of “the wake” which presents an occasion when friends of the bereaved family can extend consolation and sympathy. This time offers an opportunity when personal reminiscences of the deceased can be shared on a more intimate level, and the interests and associations that the deceased shared in his or her life with others can be recalled. During this time it is important that the priest who will preside at the funeral meets with the family and prepares with them the liturgy of the Funeral Mass.

The Vigil for the deceased is envisaged as the principal rite celebrated by the Christian community in the time following death and before the funeral liturgy. The Vigil is centered on a liturgy of the Word. This will include prayers and may also provide an opportunity for a member of the family to speak in remembrance of the deceased.

The Reception of the Body in the Church signifies the transition from the expression of the personal grief of the family in the home to the public expression of the local parish community in the liturgy. It is also the first step of returning to God the person that has been loved. This service of reception often takes place on the eve of the Funeral Mass, thus providing the possibility for mourners to be present with the family at this time who will be unable to be with them at the Funeral Mass.

In baptism they died with Christ

The prayers and symbols used at this reception recall the dignity of each Christian given to them by their baptism. The coffin is sprinkled with Holy Water as a remembrance that in the waters of baptism Christians receive the pledge of eternal life. The coffin is covered with a funeral pall to recall that on the day of their baptism a Christian is wrapped in a white robe as a child of God. The coffin is placed before the Paschal candle, symbolizing Christ's undying presence, and his victory over death by his resurrection. Other Christian symbols such as a Cross or the Book of the Gospels may also be placed on the coffin at this time. These symbols are clear signs of the dignity of the baptised Christian. The family may also wish to carry with them other emblems, which reflect the deceased's interests or personality. These should be treated with respect on the understanding that they do not conflict with the Christian symbols that are used in the ceremony. A place should be provided for them either near the coffin or the family, but they should not displace the Christian symbols representing the baptismal calling of the deceased. In many parishes in Ireland the use of the pall has become the norm and this should be respected. Reasons of social distinction do not justify its omission.

Eternal rest grant to them, O Lord

The Funeral Mass is the central liturgical celebration for the deceased. The prayers of this Mass commend the deceased to the mercy of God and offer consolation and hope to the bereaved. As the Mass is the central act of the Church's liturgy it is an act of worship of God by the Church, therefore the text of the Roman Missal should be used.

The Word of the Lord

A variety of suitable readings are offered from both the Old and New Testaments for the Funeral Mass. It is essential that these readings should be read clearly and with sensitivity. A member of the family or family friend may undertake these readings, however pressure should not be placed on anyone to read, particularly if they are not regular readers at Mass. If required, a parish reader should be available to undertake this ministry. The readings are taken from the sacred scriptures and may not be replaced by secular readings. Reflections taken from Christian literature may be used if required at a later stage in the Funeral Mass. However, some poems are better kept to the less formal stages of the funeral rites, either in the home or at the graveside.

The homily is given by the priest and should be prepared in consultation with the family of the deceased. The homily is based on the scriptures and the life of the departed in that he or she tried to live out the virtues of being a Christian. The homilist by his words is also especially called to seek to bring comfort and consolation to those bereaved. It is not

to be a eulogy, which as a form of an address focuses on the deceased and the achievements of the deceased.

The prayer of the faithful (general intercessions) call upon God to bring comfort to those who mourn and to show mercy to the deceased. Members of the family or friends of the deceased may also wish to participate in these prayers. If the families compose the, clear guidelines on format should be given.

Lord, receive the gifts we offer to win peace and rest.....

The gifts to be presented for the Eucharist are traditionally the bread and wine. It is recommended that members of the family of the deceased bring these to the altar. It is not appropriate at this stage of the Mass to bring up symbols of the deceased's past life. To do so is a confusion of the presentation of the bread and wine, which become the Eucharist for us. Furthermore "gifts" are "given," not merely a "symbol" or gesture which are taken back at the end of the Mass. If it is desired that suitable symbols associated with the interests or work of the deceased be part of the funeral rites then they should be carried into the church with the reception of remains.

The life and death of each of us has an influence on others

There are occasions when a member of the family may choose to speak to the mourners. When and how this is done can vary according to local custom, and the local practice of a diocese or parish should be respected. The funeral rites offer a variety of stages from home to church to graveside. Some personal sentiments are more appropriately spoken in the intimacy of the family home or funeral home. Other words in the form of an oration would be better suited to the traditional location of the graveside. The reception of the remains also provides an opportunity for a member of the family to offer a few words of remembrance of the deceased and acknowledgement to those who have supported the grief of the family. It should be borne in mind that the Funeral Mass is primarily an act of praise of God; it would therefore go against the spirit of the liturgy if it is perceived that a person's social status can directly influence the celebration of the liturgy. Nor would it be appropriate to use the opportunity to insert into the celebration of the liturgy contradictory sentiments that reflect a merely secular approach to the mystery of death. If it is the local custom that a member of the family generally does speak during the funeral rites in the church then certain conventions should be respected. Only one family member should speak. It should be undertaken with the agreement of the celebrant and the prepared text should be discussed with the celebrant at a suitable time before the morning of the funeral. A separate microphone should be used, rather than the ambo, which is reserved for the Word of God. The Funeral Mass in the church is neither the appropriate occasion nor place to insert a speech or eulogy. If there is a lack of clarity as to what is admissible, each diocese will have guidelines, which will attempt to offer a balance, which will respect the reverence due to the celebration of the Eucharist, and also be sensitive to the feelings of those who mourn.

Sing with all the saints in glory

Music offers the community a way of expressing convictions and feelings that words alone may fail to convey. Music has the capacity to uplift those who are mourning and

strengthens the assembly in faith and love and creates a spirit of hope. Music chosen for the funeral Mass should primarily be in praise and thanksgiving to God. Non-liturgical music should not normally be used during the Funeral Mass; if for a particular reason it is, then it should be chosen with great care and should not contradict religious sentiments. The use of taped music during the celebration of Mass is to be strongly discouraged as it is an intrusion into the celebration of a living worshipping community. As with other aspects of the funeral rites what may be considered fitting in the intimacy of a home may come across as banal in the context of the public liturgy of the Church.

For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and that it will be the same for those who have died with Jesus

The very centre of the Christian funeral rites is the death and resurrection of Christ. These rites are a faith expression and experience. Death is seen in that faith perspective. When people ask for a Funeral Mass to be celebrated they are expressing that faith message. In the funeral rites of a Christian we pray that the divine life given to us in baptism may be brought to its fulfillment in eternal glory. In celebrating a funeral we strive to bring consolation and hope to the bereaved and pray that the dead may obtain God's mercy and have eternal rest and peace.

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National Centre for Liturgy

Music for the Reception of the Body at the Church Good Practice Guidelines for Music Ministers

Introduction

When Christians die, the Church intercedes on their behalf, confident that “life is changed, not ended.” The Church also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting word of God and the sacrament of the Eucharist. During the funeral rites, the Church on earth unites with the Church in heaven to offer worship, praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life. The funeral rites also bring hope and consolation to the living.

Ministry of Consolation

As a cantor, musician or organist, you are part of the ministry of consolation to those who have suffered the loss of one whom they love. Your music allows the community to express convictions and feelings that words alone may fail to convey. It has a power to uplift the mourners, to strengthen the unity of the assembly in faith and love and to create a spirit of hope.

Planning

You may be involved with members of the family in planning sacred music and song for the funeral rites. In doing so you can console the mourners with words of faith and support. You are in a position to explain to the family the meaning and significance of the rites. The readings and prayers, psalms and songs that you choose should be proclaimed or sung with understanding, conviction and reverence. Your music should be truly expressive of the texts and at the same time simple and easily sung. A member of the family may wish to become involved in the music. It is important not to ask loved ones to assume a role that their grief or sense of loss may make too burdensome.

Sensitivity

Take care to exercise your ministry of consolation in a reverent way, always keeping in mind the life of the deceased and the circumstances of death. Since music can evoke strong feelings, it should be chosen with great sensitivity. If you are thinking of including a piece of non-religious music, it is important that it is in harmony with our faith in the Lord's death and resurrection and will contribute to the atmosphere of Christian worship. Secular music should not replace the sacred music which is part of the rite. Prayerful silence is also important and can permit the assembly to reflect upon the word of God and the meaning of the celebration.

Rite of Reception

Since the church is the place where the community of faith assembles for worship, the rite of reception of the body at the church has great significance.

Music is possible at the following points in this simple liturgy:

The Entrance Song accompanies the Procession from the door of the church and is complete when all are in place to continue with the liturgy. Participation in this may be helped by allowing, after the sprinkling of holy water, a large part of the congregation to get to their seats before the chief mourners, the coffin and the priest. If singing is not possible instrumental music is played (organ, harp, guitar, etc. depending on availability of musicians) which can continue during the placing of Christian symbols.

The Responsorial Psalm is sung after the First reading and many settings of appropriate psalms are available. The psalm enables the community to respond in faith to the readings, to express its grief and to praise God. The psalms are rich in imagery, feeling and symbolism. They powerfully express the suffering and pain, the hope and trust of people in every age and culture. Above all the psalms sing of faith in God, or revelation and redemption. Since the psalms are songs, whenever possible, they should be sung.

The Litany or Prayer of Intercession is spoken or sung after the Homily. “Lord, have mercy” is the response in the litany. This will be enhanced if sung, using, for example, one of the Penitential Rite of Mass settings with which the congregation is familiar.

A hymn to Our Lady (for example, the Salve Regina) might be appropriate during the Concluding Rite according to local custom.

The use of instrumental music as people offer their sympathies is always appreciated and contributes to the warmth of the service of the Reception of the Body at the Church.

Resources

The music at this celebration can be effectively led by a cantor or solo singer with the support of an instrumentalist. Parishes are encouraged to put this kind of structure in place so that the bereaved can make choices from the available repertoire of the parish community without too much difficulty.

Full music resources and laminated cards for congregational participation are offered in *Music for the Reception of the Body at the Church* (published by Veritas in 1998).

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National Centre for Liturgy

Music for the Funeral Rites

The following advice is offered to help you in making arrangements for music to accompany the Funeral Rites of your loved one. The order of Christian Funerals (the book we have been using at funerals since Easter 1992) outlines the role of music at this difficult time:

The music at funerals should support, console, and uplift the participants and should help to create in them a spirit of hope in Christ's victory over death and in the Christian's share in that victory.

This is the challenge which musicians, celebrants and you the bereaved face in preparing to celebrate with dignity the Funeral Rites of a Christian. There is considerable scope for music at the two services which take place in the church – the Reception of the Body at the Church and the Funeral Mass.

A. Rite of Reception

Since the church is the place where the community of faith assembles for worship, the rite of reception of the body at the church has great significance.

Music is possible at the following points in this simple liturgy:

1. The Entrance Song accompanies the Procession from the door of the church and is complete when all are in place to continue with the liturgy. Participation in this may be helped by allowing, after the sprinkling of holy water, a large part of the congregation to get to their seats before the chief mourners, the coffin and the priest. If singing is not possible instrumental music is played (organ, harp, guitar, etc. depending on availability of musicians) which can continue during the placing of Christian symbols.
2. The Responsorial Psalm is sung after the First Reading and many settings of appropriate psalms are available. The psalm enables the community to respond in faith to the readings, to express its grief and to praise God. The psalms are rich in imagery, feeling and symbolism. They powerfully express the suffering and pain, the hope and trust of people in every age and culture. Above all the psalms sing of faith in God, of revelation and redemption. Since the psalms are songs, whenever possible, they should be sung.
3. The Litany or Prayer of Intercession is spoken or sung after the Homily. Lord, have mercy is the response in the litany. This will be enhanced if sung, using, for example, one of the Penitential Rite of Mass settings with which the congregation is familiar.

A hymn to Our Lady might be appropriate during the Concluding Rite according to local custom. The use of instrumental music as people offer their sympathies is always appreciated and contributes to the warmth of the service. The music at this celebration can be effectively led by a cantor or solo singer with the support of an instrumentalist. Your parish may have this kind of structure in place so that you can make choices from the available repertoire of the parish community without too much difficulty.

B. The Funeral Mass

The choice of music, either vocal or instrumental, at a funeral Mass follows the usual guidelines for any Eucharistic celebration.

Eucharistic Prayer Acclamations

Given that the Eucharistic Prayer is the chief prayer of the Mass, it is important that everyone is encouraged to participate in the singing. Three acclamations are traditionally sung during this prayer: the Holy, Holy (Sanctus). The memorial acclamation (e.g. When we eat this bread) and the Great Amen. Choose a setting which is well known or which can be sung easily by everyone. It may be helpful to have a cantor or solo singer to lead the congregation.

Liturgy of the Word

The singing of the Responsorial Psalm is an important element of the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word. It is important not to substitute other songs in place of the psalm at this time in the liturgy.

Some people feel that singing a Gospel Acclamation is out of keeping with the spirit of a funeral liturgy. On the contrary, the Alleluia is a powerful reminder of Easter joy in the resurrection which is the source of our hope at this time.

Songs and Hymns

When choosing songs and hymns for the Funeral Mass, it is important that the congregation is able to participate as much as possible. The Entrance and Communion Songs are particularly significant. Since music can evoke strong feelings, it should be chosen with great sensitivity. If you are thinking of including a piece of non-religious music, it is important that it is in harmony with our faith in the Lord's death and resurrection and will contribute to the atmosphere of Christian worship. Secular music should not replace the sacred music which is part of the rite. Other songs are often suggested for a Funeral Mass which would be more suited to the wake in the home when favorite songs can be sung in the right setting. Once again the Order of Christian Funerals, our funeral book, offers us advice in the matter of texts and choices:

Music is integral to the funeral rites. It allows the community to express convictions and feelings that words alone may fail to convey. It has the power to console and uplift mourners and to strengthen the unity of the assembly in faith and love. The texts of the songs chosen for a particular celebration should express the paschal mystery of the

Lord's suffering, death and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture.

C. Final Commendation and Farewell

The Song of Farewell is usually sung as the coffin is incensed and sprinkled with holy water at the end of Mass. The Order of Christian Funerals contains a straightforward music of refrain and verses: Receive his/her soul and present him/her to God the Most High.

The Processional Song – May the angels lead you into Paradise- offers words of hope to everyone who gathers for the funeral. Some examples are given in the book we use and there are several popular settings of this song, including Songs of the Angels and other suitable pieces like An tAiséirí.

When Christians die, the Church intercedes on their behalf, confident that “life is changed, not ended.” The Church also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting word of God and the sacrament of the Eucharist. During the funeral rites, the Church on earth unites with the Church in heaven to offer worship, praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life. The funeral rites also bring hope and consolation to the living.

We hope that this statement will help you as you grieve and that you will be assisted in your preparations by musicians who are committed to their role as ministers of consolation and hope.

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