



What's a Catholic to do When Death Comes?

Some Pastoral Reflections

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Dear Friends in Christ,

When the passing of a loved one takes place, our hearts often become heavy and distraught.

However, when aided by our confidence in the promises of the Lord Jesus, the consolations of our Catholic faith, and the pastoral assistance of our parish and its members, not to mention the support of family, the heaviness of the moment is, at least, a bit alleviated, and we will perhaps find the path to hope. Without these assists, however, we may be reduced to making very important decisions only informed by doubt and grief. And that could be very dark, sometimes even misguided.

Having journeyed with people over many years in these challenging moments, I know that forethought and advance-planning are particularly helpful, so as to know what to do as needs arise. It is in this spirit that I offer these humble reflections in this simple booklet, meant to assist us when wondering, “what’s a Catholic to do when death comes?”

I would suggest to you that there are *three* moments when it would be good to know some of the answers to these guiding questions. (1) What’s a Catholic to do *before* death comes? (2) What’s a Catholic to do *when* death comes? (3) What does the Catholic tradition include regarding *Catholic Funeral Customs*, as we commend our loved one to the Lord?





I. ANTICIPATORY PLANS

Ideally, advance planning is always the best course of mature anticipatory action. Years in advance it is good to have secured a life insurance policy. Secondly, it is important to have a Last Will and Testament already prepared which clearly expresses your expectations for your chosen executor regarding your estate disbursement. Likewise, having a signed Living Will, which expresses your intentions for health care decisions that are to be done in light of respect for life and Catholic teaching. Further along, it is important to also think about medical plans, assisted living options, and possible hospice needs. You'd be surprised at the informative helps of Catholic hospice and social workers, not to mention your parish priests and their pastoral staffs. Important matters like these require clear-minded anticipatory thought, which is a good disposition to be in when reflecting on healthcare, funeral, or liturgical plans.

Consider, too, the careful choice of a funeral home and know what you want before going into the meeting. Plans and selections done in advance, rather than when a person is in the vulnerable and emotional state of loss, are preferred. There is no need to allow the feelings of sadness, loss, or grief to direct your purchases. Likewise, I recommend making pre-planned burial arrangements at a cemetery. Often, the funeral home can help in this selection. Yet, prominent among options, of course, is the Archdiocese of Miami's *Our Lady Queen of Mercy Cemetery* in Doral.

As health circumstances deteriorate and the end of physical life approaches, be sure to have received the spiritual preparation which the rituals of the Church provide; namely, the final absolution, the Apostolic Pardon, the Anointing of the Sick, and the Commendation of the Soul. Do not wait for the last minute! Obtain the benefits of the sacraments as soon as possible. The final rites of the Church reveal the full power of the Church acting in the name of the throne of God's mercy. Every Catholic should receive these rites before they die.



II. WHEN DEATH COMES

The first things to do when death comes is to call the parish, as well as select a funeral home. Strengthened by our faith in the Risen Christ, Catholics when faced with death are to hold firm to their faith. The Order of Christian Funerals makes clear what Catholics believe and what

they are to do prayerfully and liturgically at this trying time. Through rituals, signs and symbols, the Church takes important action at this significant pastoral moment.

In the face of death, the Church confidently proclaims that God has 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. After the death of a Christian, therefore, whose life and faith were begun in the waters of Baptism and strengthened by the Eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of its confident belief that death is not the end, nor does it break the bonds that are forged in this life. The Church, therefore, also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting Word of God and the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

As such, it is important to plan a beautiful funeral liturgy, namely the Mass of Christian burial. Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of life which has now been returned to God, the Author of Life, and the Hope of the just. The Mass, the memorial of Christ's death and Resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral. It is the centerpiece of the Church's ministry when death comes. It is our privilege to pray for the deceased, who need our intercessory help. The Church, through its funeral rites, commends the dead to God's merciful love and pleads for the forgiveness of their sins. Our personal prayers, joined to those of the Church, are helpful and efficacious.

III. CATHOLIC FUNERAL RITUALS

There are three liturgical moments in the full Catholic approach to Christian burial: (1) The Wake Service; (2) the Funeral Mass; and (3) the Rite of Committal.

1. The Vigil or **Wake Service** is the principal celebration of the Christian community during the time before the Funeral Mass. The Wake Service is ordinarily led by a deacon or priest, who comes to the funeral home to lead a prayer service for the family and friends gathered for visitation with the body present. An opened or closed casket is to be discerned by the members of the immediate family, or done as reflected in the plans or will of the deceased.

The Wake Service includes a Liturgy of the Word with intercessory prayers. The gathering for the occasion of the Vigil gives family members and friends of the

deceased an opportunity to comfort one another. Although separate from the formal Wake Service, photographs, slide presentations, personal mementos, memorial cards, devotional prayers and testimonials are additional personal elements that could be included to enrich the occasion of the wake. The Wake service and Rite of Committal ceremony (described below) are likewise the best placements for an optional brief eulogy, delivered by a member of the family, and according to local custom.



2. The ***Funeral Mass***, as mentioned above, is the centerpiece of Catholic funeral rituals. When one of its members dies, the Church especially encourages the celebration of a Mass. At the Funeral Mass, the family and friends gather at the Church with the body present, expressive of hope in the Resurrection. Although a ceremony with the ashes, or cremains, present is permitted, it is a ceremony with the body present that enables the Church to utilize the full symbolism ritualized in Catholic funerals.

Regarding the sequence of the Mass: the body enters the church, carried by the pall bearers, who are pre-selected fellow Christians accompanying the body on its last journey. The body is blessed with Holy Water and the casket is draped with the funeral pall, reminiscent of the baptismal garment once worn at the beginning of the Christian journey, pointing to the spiritual dignity of the baptized person. Often, a cross is placed on the coffin, as a reminder that the Christian is marked by the sign of the Cross in Baptism, and through Jesus' suffering on the Cross is brought to the victory of the Resurrection. A Book of the Gospels can sometimes be used as a sign that Christians live by the Word of God and fidelity to that Word leads to eternal life. Secular symbols have NO PLACE in the Catholic funeral liturgy.

The body of a layman or laywoman is brought by procession down the main aisle and arranged in the position with the feet closest to the sanctuary. After all, the person stood in the assembly facing the sanctuary in a position of hope throughout their life. In death they are, therefore, similarly arranged. On the other hand, the body of a deacon, priest or bishop is arranged with the head closest to the sanctuary. During their lives, they ministered to God's people from the sanctuary and faced the assembly. In death, they are arranged likewise.



The Easter candle is placed near the entrance of the sanctuary and near the location of the coffin. It reminds the faithful of Christ's undying presence among them, of his victory over sin and death, and of their share in that victory by virtue of their Christian initiation through the sacramental life of the Church. Christ is the Light who

illuminates the darkness and reveals the path to life. His victorious light leads the way, even beyond the darkness of physical death.

Music is an integral part of the Catholic funeral rites. It allows the community to express feelings that words alone fail to convey. It has the power to console and uplift the mourners and to strengthen the unity of the assembly in love and hope. Incense is utilized as a sign of honor to the body of the deceased, which through Baptism became a temple of the Holy Spirit. Incense is also a sign of the community's prayers rising to Heaven at this moment on behalf of the deceased. The Commendation and Song of Farewell is chanted, while the incensation of the body take place.

The Mass of Christian burial concludes with the procession to the place of repose. Often times, many people in the assembly accompany the family to the place of repose for the brief Rite of Committal and interment.



3. Following the Funeral Mass is the ***Rite of Committal***, which serves as the conclusion of the funeral rites. The brief Rite of Committal is an expression of the communion that exists between the Church on earth and the Church in Heaven. It is the final act of the community of faith in caring for the body of its deceased member, during which the place of permanent repose is blessed and the deceased is laid to :

rest. In the Archdiocese of Miami, it may be celebrated at three locations:

- a. *Grave*, sometimes called the burial plot, where permanent bodily in-ground burial takes place;
- b. *Tomb* or *Mausoleum*, where above-ground bodily interment takes place;
- c. *Columbarium*, where the ashes (i.e., cremains) are permanently reposed.

In committing a body to its final resting place, the community expresses the hope that, with those who have gone before us, marked with the sign of faith, the deceased awaits the glory of the Resurrection. It is the expectation of the Catholic Church that the remains of the deceased (whether bodily or ashes) are given a place of permanent repose.

The Rite of Committal includes the following sequence: recalling of God's Word, the blessing of the place of repose, a litany of intercession for the deceased, the Lord's Prayer, the concluding statement of hope-filled faith ("Eternal rest grant unto him/her, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May he/she rest in peace. Amen. May his soul and all the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen."), and then the final blessing, which concludes the rite.

IV. OPTIONAL BURIAL CUSTOMS

Following the ceremony, there is often a blessing and presentation of a crucifix to the immediate family, a sign of hope in Christ. Some families optionally choose to come forward and lay a rose/flower on the coffin as a final gesture of loving remembrance. Some optionally choose to stay and be present for the lowering of the body into the ground. Some choose to assist in symbolically placing soil into the grave. Afterwards, it is often customary for the family to gather for a consoling family get-together or meal following the ceremonies.

V. WHAT “NOT” TO DO

If cremation is chosen, the ashes are NEVER to be kept at home on the bed-stand, nor placed on the living room hearth. As already mentioned, it is the Catholic expectation that every Christian has a permanent place of repose in the options described above. Likewise, if cremation is chosen, the ashes are not to be sprinkled nor spread throughout the backyard, or in the water of a nearby canal, nor in the ocean. Out of dignity for the body, the cremains are always placed in an urn, which is then put in a formal place of permanent repose for reverent acknowledgment and future visitation.

VI. OTHER HELPFUL THOUGHTS

- Hospice is one of the great gifts of our time. They gently help a dissonant and bewildered family gather in reverence and proceed with intention.
- When someone you love is dying, take turns having someone keep the person company so that they do not need to be alone or possibly afraid or anxious. When speaking of death and dying, do so gently with that person. Make sure they have no unfinished business that troubles them. Help them talk it out. If a priest has unfortunately not been called by this time, now would be the time to do so, so that they are assured of having the Sacraments of the Anointing of the Sick and Eucharist. Read and sing to them. Tell them stories. Even get stories from them, if they are willing and able. These would be gestures of love and grace.
- Regarding the casket, simplicity says a lot. Consider the selection of a simple, perhaps, wooden or pine casket. There is no advantage in being buried in the gold of Ophir.
- Considering planning your own funeral liturgy. With the help of the parish bereavement office, select your favorite reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, your favorite Psalm, Epistle, and Gospel. Select your favorite liturgical hymns which would add dignity and grace to the occasion.



Consider being buried in an alb, as a sign of your white baptismal garment. Every Christian may be buried in a white alb, a sign of their identity with Christ. Otherwise, individuals are buried in clothes that are germane to the deceased.

In the Catholic tradition, November is the month when we remember those who have gone before us. November 2nd is All Soul's Day, a traditional day of remembering our deceased loved ones. Special Masses and novenas are common Catholic practices which help us pray for our departed loved ones. This compliments the world-wide Catholic custom of daily Masses year-round being celebrated for a "particular" intention, scheduled as part of the liturgical prayer of the Church. Simply contact the parish office to make arrangements for the name of your loved one to be included.

VI. FINAL REFLECTIONS

It is always a good thing to call the parish and allow the Pastoral Team and the community of the Church to assist you in your time of need. Whether in the process of advance planning, or in the experience of sudden realities, allow your faith to be your strength. Consider Saint Paul's wise counsel:

"In life and in death, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8).

