

CREMATION

The Roman Catholic position concerning the practice of cremation underwent significant change in 1963. The absolute restriction was changed not to condemn the actual practice but to focus upon the reasons that may underlie the practice. Church law now states that: "Funeral rites are to be granted to those who have chosen cremation, unless there is evidence that their choice was indicated by anti-Christian motives. (#15, ORDO EXSEQUIARUM, 1969)"



Although the prohibition has been lifted, there are still serious questions surrounding the practice that must have proper reflection. In many cases, cremation may be desirable in light of the increasing costs of burial in our society. While an important consideration, it should not be the only criteria for the decision.

Recently, the bishops of the United States provided that the ashes of the deceased may be present when celebrating the funeral. Before, the Church required that cremation of the body take place after the funeral. Each pastor has been given the faculty by the bishop of the diocese to permit the presence of cremains (ashes of the deceased's body) at the Funeral Mass. The prayers of the liturgy are adapted slightly, but the rituals remain the same.

It is important to remember that the Church also strongly encourages the proper disposition of the ashes of the deceased. The first choice would be to place the ashes in a columbarium – or place designated for the interment of ashes. The second choice would be to bury the ashes as we would the body of the deceased. Whatever is chosen, the ashes must be given honor and respect and not be placed anywhere that is not considered sacred or profane. The pastor of the parish should be consulted when making the decision about the interment of a loved one's ashes.

OTHER PARTICULARS

The Church offers the funeral rites to anyone who seeks them. Christians of other denominations may be afforded the rites of the Church. Catechumens and other non-baptized persons may be buried from the Church. Some circumstances may preclude the celebration of the Eucharist but not the other rites.

Other practices surrounding funerals in our society often are also observed along with the rites of the Church. Civil ceremonies or rituals are the most common rites celebrated along with the Christian. The Church does not seek to demean these secular rites but seeks to insure that the Christian rites and the civil rites not interfere or compete with each other. A common occurrence of this circumstance is the funeral of one who has served in the military. During the funeral liturgy, civil rites and symbols would be inappropriate. The Church asks that the worship of God not be encumbered by anything else. Specifically, the custom of the covering the casket with the U.S. Flag be observed outside of the liturgy. The pall, symbol of the white garment received at baptism, should cover the casket during the celebration of the liturgy.

CONCLUSION

At the time of death, the Church seeks to comfort and console those who mourn the passing of one who is loved into eternal life. The Church also celebrates the gift of the deceased's life and prays in intercession for her child. It is a time of great emotion and requires that appropriate rites be celebrated. Our culture and society influence many aspects of our lives and at times conflict with our beliefs and practices as Catholic Christians. The Church earnestly desires that all understand her rites and seeks to assist all in understanding those conflicts. The richness of the liturgy provides us with the opportunity to adapt the rites so that they may speak a message of consolation to those who mourn and praise God for the gift of life. It is hoped that the information provided herein will help those who may find themselves in the position of planning funeral rites. You are invited to ask additional questions of a priest or other minister in your parish.

The Catholic Funeral:

An Overview



Diocese of Des Moines

Prepared by the
Office of Worship
and the
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INTRODUCTION

The death of one of our sisters and brothers is a significant event for us as Church. It is a time when we, who loved the deceased person, mourn for our loss. It is a time when we as the Church celebrate God's gift of life and mark, with special rites and gatherings, the return of that life to our loving God. It is a time when the Church earnestly seeks to minister not only to the deceased but the living as well. The rites of the Order of Christian Funerals are rites of the living. It is how the Church walks with those who mourn. The following is shared to assist ministers and faithful alike with some aspects of the Order of Christian Funerals. It is not intended that it be comprehensive but focus upon particular aspects with which some may not be familiar. It is hoped that this writing can assist those who may at one time have to plan such rites and clarify some questions that have arisen since the implementation of the Order of Christian Funerals in 1989. Questions that may remain after reading this booklet should be discussed with priest or other minister who have experience with the rites.



JOURNEY OF GRIEF

As Christians we know intellectually that our loved ones are in a better place. Emotionally we feel a tremendous loss and emptiness. The journey of feelings between the head and the heart can be challenging and lonely. The ones left behind discover that their lives have changed too.

Parishes, as a faith community, can assist greatly in the grieving process. A grief network could consist of cards, visits, grief material, grief work sessions, sharing times, breakfast or dinner get-togethers, etc. The ideas are limited only by the people willing to minister.

John 19:26-27: When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, He said to his mother "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

The common celebration of the rites surrounding death takes the form of three liturgical celebrations: a Vigil, the Funeral liturgy, and the Rite of Committal. The Vigil for the Deceased usually takes place the day or evening before the Funeral liturgy. There are two forms that this vigil make take. A Liturgy of the Word consisting of Scripture, psalmody and song follows the usual order as at Mass. Another option may be to pray the Office of the Dead (Liturgy of the Hours) consisting of the same elements as above but in different form.



Prior to the revision of the funeral rites, the common practice was to gather mourners and well-wishers together at the funeral home the evening prior to the funeral to pray the Rosary. This private devotion was prayed to fill the void where the public liturgy no longer provided a ritual. The reinstatement of the vigil in the funeral rites has replaced the need for other devotions. The vigil, however, in no way prohibits the praying of the Rosary or other devotions. Many have come to expect such devotions at the time of death. Provision can be made for them to be included within the order of rites. Private devotions, however, must never replace the official liturgy of the Church.

The funeral liturgy usually is within the celebration of the Eucharist (or Mass). In some circumstances, the celebration of the Eucharist may not be possible. When this is the case, a Liturgy of the Word is celebrated with the appropriate rituals of the funeral. Whatever the circumstances, the rituals celebrated at the funeral consist of receiving the body during which it is sprinkled with holy water and covered with the funeral pall. Following Communion, special prayers are added to the liturgy along with the ritual gesture of incensing the body.

The final station of the Order of Christian Funerals is the Rite of Committal which usually takes place at the cemetery. Following the funeral liturgy, the body is taken in procession to the place of interment. Special prayers and readings are celebrated committing the body to the

ground and the life of the deceased person to God.

All of these stations and rites may be adapted in light of the circumstances surrounding the death of the person and the situation of the family. Priests and ministers responsible for assisting the families and friends of the deceased are well versed in these adaptations and can assist with planning the rites.

Funerals may be celebrated at any time. Funeral liturgies which include the celebration of the Eucharist, however, may not be celebrated during the Triduum in Holy Week, Easter and its successive Sundays, and Holydays of Obligation (i.e. Christmas, the Assumption, etc.). A Eucharistic liturgy should take place as soon after one of the days as possible.



MUSIC

Music is an integral part of any liturgical celebration. Music adds to the solemnity of the occasion as well as enhances our participation in the liturgy. Music selected should always be appropriate to the occasion and to the liturgy. Some music is inappropriate for use in the liturgy. Secular music, in particular, is inappropriate within the liturgy because it is not written for that purpose. Such music may hold significant meaning to those who mourn or have been held in particular esteem by the deceased but diverts our attention from the praise of God and the worship we celebrate. Some music may include certain thoughts or statements which are contrary to the beliefs of the worshipping community and its inclusion in the liturgical celebration may offend that community.

Selection of music should have as its primary motivation praise of God and secondly the enhancement of the liturgy. The advice of the priest or other minister is invaluable in planning the music to be incorporated in the liturgy. Other circumstances also may determine the types of music used, i.e., availability of musicians, competence of the musicians, the familiarity of the assembly gathered with the music, etc.