

# Guidelines for Catholic Funerals

## Diocese of Palm Beach



*From the early history of the Catholic Church, the reverence given to the body of the beloved deceased reflects our hope in resurrection. We believe that in death, life is not ended but merely changed and our prayers continue for those who walked with us on our pilgrimage on earth.*

*This leaflet has been prepared by the Liturgical Commission of our Diocese of Palm Beach to offer guidelines in making funeral arrangements with the local parish priest and funeral director.*

When a family member or friend becomes seriously ill, please notify the parish. It is important that the sick person be able to receive the Sacrament of Anointing. When one is in danger of death, Viaticum (Eucharist) is offered. All sacraments are for the living and are to be administered when one has the capacity to receive the strength and blessings they offer.

The time immediately following death is often one of shock and bewilderment for those who were close to the deceased. The Prayers of the Church help those who mourn express their grief as well as find consolation through faith in Christ. In the face of death, the Church confidently proclaims that God has created each person for eternal life, and that Christ, by His death and resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death that bound humanity.

After the death of a Christian, whose life was begun in the waters of Baptism and strengthened at the Eucharistic table, the Church celebrates the funeral rites. Through these rites the Church:

1. prays and intercedes on, behalf of the deceased;
2. offers worship and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and hope of the just;
3. consoles the sorrowing with the Word of God and the Holy Eucharist;
4. commends the dead to God's merciful love; and
5. recognizes the spiritual bond that still exists between the living and the dead until that day when all the faithful will be united and death will be no more.

The death and burial of Christians have always had a deeply religious and spiritual meaning. Inspired by the description of the burial and resurrection of the Lord in the Gospels, the early Church buried its dead with proper care, reverence and prayer. With faith in the Risen Savior, the Christian community honored the body of the dead and took part in the prayers and Mass offered for a deceased member.

**The Mass, the memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral.**

## FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS

The clergy or pastoral ministers of the parish must be consulted before any liturgical arrangements are made with the funeral director. This provides the opportunity to have a clear understanding of the meaning and significance of the rites as well as for family members to participate in the rites themselves. Then, the arrangements will need to be confirmed by the funeral director. In making advanced arrangements for the type of funeral one would like to have, this same order of procedure is to be followed.

## FUNERAL RITES OF THE CHURCH

### **1. VIGIL SERVICE**

At the Vigil Service, usually conducted in the funeral home on the eve of the Funeral Mass, the faithful keep watch with the family in prayer to the God of mercy and find strength in Christ's presence. The Vigil is a Scripture or Evening Prayer Service. The Rosary, or part of the Rosary, may be prayed as well, but not as a replacement of the Vigil. This service is often the first gathering of the faithful and friends with the family, and some, who cannot attend the Funeral Mass because of work or other reasons, will attend.

### **2. FUNERAL MASS**

The tradition of the Church has always been the celebration of the Mass **with the body present**. Christians respect and honor the body of the dead, which in Baptism becomes the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The Funeral Mass includes the reception of the body, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the Final Commendation and Farewell. We are reminded of Christ's own words, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood shall live forever" (John 6:55).

### **3. RITE OF COMMITTAL**

For the final disposition of the body, it is the ancient Christian custom to bury or entomb the bodies of the dead in a cemetery, which means a "resting place". The Rite of Committal is the conclusion of the funeral rites, and may be celebrated beside the open grave or place of interment. The faithful express the hope that, with all those who have gone before marked with the sign of faith, the deceased awaits the glory of the resurrection and passes into the welcoming company of those who see God face to face.

## **CREMATION**

Because of the sacred tradition of awaiting the resurrection of the body, the Church does not encourage, but allows cremation. Cremation is not to be seen as the norm. If cremation is chosen, the Funeral Mass with the body present is to precede cremation. However, when circumstances prevent the presence of the body at the Funeral Liturgy, it is appropriate that the urn containing the cremated remains of the body be present for the funeral rites, including the Vigil for the Deceased, the Funeral Liturgy, and the Rite of Committal. The Funeral Liturgy should always be celebrated in a church. The cremated remains of the body should then be reverently buried or entombed in a cemetery or columbarium rather than scattered.

Catholics believe in the communion of saints and the resurrection of the dead. We pray for the dead, and we pray to be prepared for death whenever it comes. Like Francis of Assisi, may we befriend death, little by little? Let us meditate on this hymn based on his writings:

*And you, most kind and gentle death,  
Waiting to hush our final breath,  
You lead to heaven the child of God,  
Where Christ our Lord the way has trod.*