

ORDER OF CHRISTIAN FUNERALS

Fr. Dwayne Thoman

A range of thoughts and emotions flood over me whenever I learn the survivors of a long time faithful parishioner decide not to use the Church's funeral rites for their deceased loved one. Dismay. Disappointment. Crestfallen. Confusion. Even anger. Sometimes this decision is made even after parish staff have attended to the dying parishioner's needs, sometimes over an extended period of time.

Why would family and friends decide not to avail themselves of these beautiful rites, especially the funeral Mass? Why would a faithful, long time, Catholic be denied the unity and prayers of the Universal Church in a Funeral Mass? This seems like a travesty.

Thus the purpose of this article is to teach the Church's funeral rites. Hopefully it will encourage your use of these rites.

The Church's Order of Christian Burial is comprised of three liturgies that are integrated with one another.

The Vigil for the Deceased, commonly called "the wake," is the first liturgy for the deceased. It is at this liturgy we are most aware of the person's life. Friends and family come to extend their condolences and offer comfort. Often times families choose to display photos, provide a video and display special mementos – such as crafts. We tell stories and share memories. Since the wake is about the *life* of the deceased, this is the best time to offer a eulogy. Eulogies are not appropriate within the context of the funeral Mass. They are best offered at the time of the wake.

Normally, wakes are held at the funeral home the day before the funeral Mass. For pastoral reasons, they may also be held at the church. One reason may be that an unusually large number of people is anticipated. Another reason may be that one or more family members may be handicapped and find it easier to be in church. The decision about having the wake in church should be made in consultation with your preparing priest or deacon.

The Mass of Christian Burial is the second movement of these three liturgies. (Another liturgy in this second movement is a Funeral Liturgy Outside of Mass. In this case, a Mass should be offered later for the deceased.) At the funeral Mass the Christian community gathers with the family and friends to unite themselves to the power of Christ's resurrection. We pray for God's mercy and compassion upon the deceased. We seek strength for ourselves to embrace the Paschal Mystery into our own lives.

The funeral Mass really brings us full circle to the moment of our baptism. Baptism is normally conducted within the context of the Mass. Baptism is the beginning of our Christian journey through life. Time and time again throughout

life we come back to the Mass for our nourishment. Then, at our death, we celebrate the end of that journey at Mass marking our transition to the next life.

The third rite is **The Committal**. The Rite of Committal expresses the unity between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven. Our prayer commends the deceased to the welcoming arms of the community which no longer needs faith, but who see God face to face.

Normally, the committal immediately follows the funeral Mass. Whenever possible, it is best that the Rite of Committal be celebrated at the final place of disposition – the grave, the mausoleum, the columbarium – rather than a cemetery chapel. This will best help mourners to move to closure.

PASTORAL CONCERNS:

- Does the Church allow cremation? Yes. It is best that cremation is performed after the funeral Mass. Viewing the body at the wake and being present at the funeral Mass is psychologically healthy for mourners so that we can more actively work closure on this death.
 - What is the proper way to dispose of cremains? The cremains deserve the same level of respect as the body. They can be buried on a family plot or placed in a columbarium. They should not be taken home and placed on the mantle or end up in the back corner of closet. Cremains should never be divided up among family members or dispersed over the land or water. We wouldn't think of doing that to a body; why would we do that to cremains? The ashes of the deceased deserve the same level of profound respect we give the body.
 - What are the church fees? First of all, let me clearly state no one is ever denied the funeral rites of the Church because they cannot afford a fee. Praying for our deceased loved ones is of paramount importance over a fee. For those who can afford an offering to the parish, we suggest a range of \$125-\$150. A cantor and pianist receive a separate offering. The priest or deacon receive no compensation unless the family offers it.
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This article reviews the essential meaning of the Church's Order of Christian Funerals. Be absolutely certain those who will be preparing your funeral liturgies understand these liturgies. Do not allow them to deny you the right to these liturgies and the prayer of the Universal Church on your behalf. They beautifully move us from grief to the promised joy and hope of the resurrection and eternal life with God. (Fr. Dwayne Thoman)