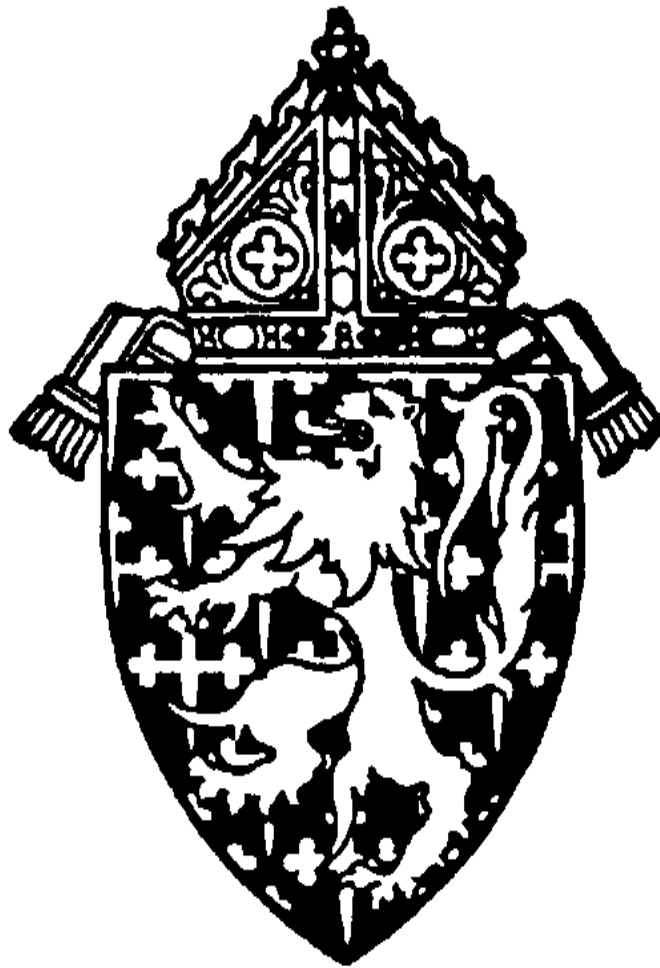


# GUIDELINES FOR CATHOLIC FUNERALS



# **Catholic Funeral Guidelines**

**Diocese of Wilmington**

## **Catholic Funeral Guidelines**

*Eternal rest grant unto them,  
O Lord,  
and let Perpetual Light  
shine upon them.  
May their souls  
and the souls  
of all the faithful departed,  
through the mercy of God,  
rest in peace.  
Amen.*

*May 2012*

My Dear Friends in Christ,

The Catholic Church has a long history and experience of helping people to prepare spiritually for death and assisting families dealing with the sickness, death, burial and bereavement of a loved one.

Gathering the wisdom of the Church's long experience, I offer these words to priests, permanent deacons, lay ministers, funeral providers, grieving Catholic families and all Catholics in the Diocese of Wilmington.

There is a trend among some of our Catholic people to omit the traditional Catholic funeral rites when they experience the death of their loved ones in favor of a prayer service at the funeral home or a private graveside service. In many cases it is because the children of the deceased have not been active participants in the sacramental life of the Church. Nothing is more heart breaking than to hear about a life-long devoted Catholic was laid to rest without the benefits of a Funeral Mass.

While our dedicated priests, permanent deacons and lay ministers will minister to people in their time of need, regardless of a family's decisions, I want to encourage Catholic priests, permanent deacons, lay ministers funeral providers and grieving Catholic families to promote together the use of the Catholic funeral ritual.<sup>1</sup>

Three separate and sequential rites are proposed as the most fitting way to celebrate this pilgrimage of the deceased Christian: The Vigil for the Deceased (often referred to as the Wake), the Funeral Liturgy (or Mass of Christian Burial), and the Rite of Committal. The physical movement or procession from one place to another for the celebration of these rites can add to the sense of journey or pilgrimage and contribute to the experience of separation through which mourners must pass before they are able to re-center their lives after the death of a family member or friend.<sup>2</sup>

We must work together to educate and counsel our Catholic families so that they understand and appreciate the spiritual and emotional support derived from a full and active participation in the Catholic funeral ritual.

I appeal to Catholic family members making decisions about funeral arrangements for their relatives. Please consider the deepest hopes and desires of your loved ones in their best days and make the right choice to celebrate our Catholic funeral liturgy. The Eucharist helps to heal the sorrow that comes from the loss of a loved one. This may very well be a special moment of grace for you and your family. The celebration of the Catholic funeral rites promotes a healthy grieving process that can lead to deep levels of personal conversion and spiritual growth. In contrast, the avoidance of these funeral rites may short-circuit grief and healing.

Our Catholic tradition urges the Church today to face death with honest rituals that preserve its Christian and human values. Since, in rising to new life, Christ won victory over death for His followers, faith impels the Church to celebrate that victory in its funeral liturgies.<sup>4</sup> I also commend to you the use of our Catholic cemeteries which are a visible sign of our Catholic beliefs about death, eternal life and the communion of saints.

I thank you all in advance for your cooperation and zeal in promoting the consistent use of our Catholic funeral rites.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend W. Francis Malooly  
Bishop of Wilmington

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<sup>1</sup> Canon 1176 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law reads:

1. Christ's faithful who have died are to be given a Church funeral according to the norms of law.
2. Church funerals are to be celebrated according to the norms of the liturgical books. In these funeral rites the Church prays for the spiritual support of the dead, it honors their bodies, and at the same time it brings to the living the comfort of hope.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Reflections on the Body, Cremation, and Catholic Funeral Rites* by the Committee on the Liturgy, National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1997), 13. Subsequent references to this document are abbreviated as RBCCF.

<sup>3</sup> *Order of Christian Funerals* (New York, Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1989) Subsequent references to this work are abbreviated as OCF.

## **Norms for Catholic Burial Diocese of Wilmington**

### **The Catholic Understanding of Death**

“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. Christ ‘achieved his task of redeeming humanity and giving perfect glory to God, principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and glorious ascension’.” (*Order of Christian Funerals* [OCF, 1])

“At the death of a Christian, whose life of faith was begun in the waters of baptism and strengthened at the Eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of her confident belief that death is not the end nor does it break the bonds forged in life. 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.” (OCF, 4)

Through the celebration of the funeral rites, particularly the Vigil for the Deceased, the Funeral Liturgy, and the Rite of Committal the Church calls for the active participation of all.

### **I. General Principles and Norms**

1. In the Diocese of Wilmington the *Order of Christian Funerals* (1989) is to be used as the normative liturgical ritual for the celebration of the funeral rites.
2. The three separate and sequential rituals in the funeral rites are: the *Vigil and Related Rites and Prayers*, the *Funeral Liturgy (or Mass of Christian Burial)* and the *Rite of Committal*. While there are distinct rituals, the funeral rites as a whole are a single movement of prayer which need to be celebrated integrally. The General Introduction and the Introduction to each rite or group of rites, set forth guiding principles for the proper liturgical celebration of these various rites.
3. **It is the responsibility of each pastor to ensure that these liturgical principles are respected, understood, and used with pastoral sensitivity by all those, namely, priests, deacons, and lay persons, who participate in the ministry of consolation: to care for the dying, to pray for the dead, to comfort those who mourn.**
4. **Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the Pastor to both inform the funeral service providers of the proper order and liturgical expression of the funeral rites as set forth in the *Order of Christian Funerals* and to ensure that they are followed according to the desire of the Church.**
5. The Church encourages the full celebration of the funeral rites, especially the Funeral Mass, for her faithful deceased members. No one should be denied the Church’s funeral rites because of the neglect of the practice of the faith of their family members. It is the responsibility of the Pastor to ensure that the funeral rites are available for these persons.
6. Every Catholic, unless specifically excluded according to the norms of Church law, is entitled to the Church’s ministry at the time of death.

## II. Special Pastoral Concerns

### 1. Cremation

Respect for the human body is envisioned in the funeral rites of the Church.

“The body of the deceased Catholic Christian is also the body once washed in Baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation, and fed with the Bread of Life. Thus, the Church’s reverence of the sacredness of the human body grows out of a reverence and concern both natural and supernatural for the human person. The body of the deceased brings forcefully to mind the Church’s conviction that the human body is in Christ a temple of the Holy Spirit and is destined for future glory at the resurrection of the dead.” (OCF, 412)

“Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in those rites.” (OCF, 413)

“When extraordinary circumstances make the cremation of the body the only feasible choice, pastoral sensitivity must be exercised by priests, deacons, and others who minister to the family of the deceased.” (OCF, 415)

“The cremated remains of a body must be treated with the same respect given to the human body from which they come. This includes the use of a worthy vessel to contain the cremated remains, the manner in which they are carried, the care and attention to appropriate placement and transport, and the final disposition. The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium. **The practices of dividing, commingling and scattering cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or keeping cremated remains in the home of a relative or friend of the deceased is not permitted.** Whenever possible, appropriate means for recording with dignity the memory of the deceased should be adopted, such as a plaque or stone which records the name of the deceased.” (OCF, 417)

Therefore, in the Diocese of Wilmington the following norms are to be observed:

1. When the choice has been made to cremate a body, it is strongly recommended that the cremation take place after the Funeral Liturgy followed by the proper disposition of the remains according to the norms of the Church, that is, burial in a grave, or entombment in a mausoleum or columbarium. The Rite of Committal is conducted at the time of burial or entombment.
2. If cremation takes place before the Funeral Liturgy the following protocols are in order during the Celebration of the Funeral Mass:
  - a. The introductory rites are held including the blessing of the urn. The celebrant greets the family at the doors of the church or in the gathering area, it is suggested that you provide a table where the urn can be placed during the introductory rites and blessing. The urn is then brought to the front of the church and placed on a table at its customary place in front of the paschal candle. **Placing cremated remains within a casket to give the false impression of a full body is strictly prohibited.**

- b. A pall or any other covering is not placed on the urn.
- c. During Mass, prayers that do not make reference to the honoring or burying of the body of the deceased, should be chosen instead of those which have these themes.
- d. The final commendation is held including the incensing of the urn.
- e. The cremated remains are then taken to the cemetery for the committal service.  
 \*It is strongly urged that the committal of the cremated remains takes place immediately following Mass, as is the custom for the corporal remains of a human body. In rare instances the committal may be delayed because of extenuating circumstances such as the deceased being buried at an out of state cemetery. In instances where the burial is delayed, the alternate form of dismissal found on page 5 of the “Order of Christian Funeral Appendix for Cremation” is used. Before granting permission for the cremated remains to be present for the Mass of Christian Burial, the priest should have assurance from the funeral service provider and the family that the cremated remains will be properly interred or entombed within a reasonable amount of time. If this fact cannot be properly ascertained, it is a legitimate reason to disallow the Funeral Mass with the cremated remains present and require that a Memorial Mass be offered instead.

## 2. **Music for the Funeral Liturgy**

- a. “Music is integral to the funeral rites. It allows the faith community to express convictions and feelings that words alone may fail to convey. It has the power to console and uplift the mourners and to strengthen the unity of the assembly in faith and love.” (OCF, 30)
- b..In some pastoral settings, there has been an increasing confusion about the appropriate types of music for funerals. An almost “anything goes” mentality has crept into the funeral rites, that is the Vigil (Wake), the Funeral Mass, and the Committal.
- d. **Non-liturgical or secular music is forbidden before or during the funeral rites, particularly in the Church.**
- e.. The celebrant, in collaboration with the parish’s, Director of Music/Liturgy, is to approve and authorize the use of proper liturgical music for all the funeral rites.

## 3. **The Homily and the Remembrance of the Deceased**

“A brief homily based on the readings should always be given at the funeral liturgy. The homilist should dwell on God’s compassionate love and on the Paschal Mystery of the Lord as proclaimed in the Scripture readings.” (OCF, 141)

“The homilist should also help the members of the assembly to understand that the mystery of God’s love and the mystery of Jesus’ victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased and that these mysteries are active in their own lives as well. Through the homily members of the family and community should receive consolation and strength to face the death of one of their members with a hope nourished by the saving word of God.” (OCF, 27)

The fact that a homily focuses on the Paschal Mystery does not mean that there is to be no reference to the deceased person. The homilist helps the bereaved to understand the mystery of

God's love and the Paschal Mystery in the life of the deceased person and in their own lives. References to the person's life of faith and love are obviously appropriate.

The *Order of Christian Funerals* recognizes the need to reflect on the life of the loved one who has just died by providing an invitation in the *Vigil for the Deceased* to a member or friend of the family to speak in remembrance of the deceased person just before the concluding rite. The same invitation may be offered before the opening prayer of the Funeral Mass or after the Prayer after Communion of the Funeral Mass.

**Therefore, in the Diocese of Wilmington the following norms are to be observed:**

1. In the Diocese of Wilmington, it is recommended that the Vigil (Wake) is the most appropriate time for members of the family and friends to share memories of the deceased or to pay tribute to the deceased through vocal remembrances, photographs, favorite songs, etc.

2. The reception after the burial is another appropriate time for the remembrances because there is less of an emotional burden and the context is looking toward the future in a more positive manner.

3. If a family member wishes to express appreciation or say something in remembrance at Mass, the following are to be observed:

- + Only one family member or friend is to speak.
- + The words to be shared must be in writing and approved in advance by the celebrant.
- + Because of the intensity of emotions at the time of a funeral, the person who will speak is to be brief, that is, no more than five minutes.
- + This faith-remembrance is to take place prior to the opening prayer or *after* the Prayer after Communion.
- + Because this is not part of the Liturgy of the Word, this remembrance is not to take place at the ambo, but at another appropriate place of the celebrant's choosing.

**4. Mass of Christian Burial in a Funeral Home or Cemetery Chapel**

These guidelines reflect the usual practice of the Rite of Christian Burial being conducted in three places: the home of the deceased (to which the funeral home is equated), the parish church where the deceased received the sacraments, and the cemetery. Where special circumstances are involved (handicapped survivors, deceased from another diocese with no local parish affiliation) permission from the respective pastor is to be requested and not presumed for Mass outside of the church.

**5. Catholic Cemeteries**

1. The preferred place of burial or entombment for the earthly remains of a deceased Catholic is a Catholic Cemetery. These sacred places are reliquaries of the Saints. Regularly scheduled Masses of Remembrance and special liturgical celebrations throughout the year affirm the sacred nature of the Catholic Cemetery. In the event that a deceased Catholic is interred or entombed in a non-sectarian or military cemetery the grave or crypt should be individually blessed at the time of the committal. Members of Catholic families belonging to other religious denominations may be buried in Catholic Cemeteries. In the spirit of ecumenism, other Christian denominations without comparable facilities of their own may also be buried in Catholic Cemeteries.

## 2. Low Cost Burials:

Upon a Parish Priest's **written confirmation** that a deceased Catholic requires financial consideration, the Cemetery will provide a low cost burial option as follows:

If the Deceased owns no grave, Catholic Cemeteries will provide a grave at All Saints Cemetery and the interment fee at a reduced charge. The funeral director is responsible for providing the vault.

If the deceased owns a grave at Cathedral or All Saints Cemetery, Catholic Cemeteries will provide the interment fee at a reduced charge. The funeral director is responsible for providing the vault.

## 6. Keeping the Memory of the Deceased

In keeping with our Catholic tradition, all are encouraged to ensure that the memory of our dead is observed in the following ways:

- + Offering of Masses for the deceased, especially on the anniversary of death.
- + Parish Remembrance on All Souls Day.
- + A Parish Celebration of Mass for the recently deceased of the last year during the month of November.
- + The encouragement of cemetery visitation.
- + Praying for the Living and the Dead.

## 7. Pastoral Options for Consideration

**a. In cases where the deceased does not have a large family or circle of friends, the Funeral Mass may be celebrated at one of the regularly scheduled daily Masses in the parish. The presence of the daily Mass community is extremely consoling to the mourners. A core group of readers, Eucharistic ministers, musical ministers and servers may emerge from the daily Mass attendees.**

b. If two or more families or a religious community desire it. A Funeral Mass may be celebrated for more than one person.

c. When a wake is permitted in the parish church it is preferred that it occur in the gathering area separate from the main worship space. If a wake is held within the worship space, The Vigil for the Deceased with Reception at the Church (OCF #82) is to be celebrated. When this Vigil for the Deceased is held in the parish church, the priest or deacon is to be vested in an alb and stole. Depending upon local parish practice, lay ministers may be vested in an alb.

d. Funeral services professionals are expected to use proper terminology as follows  
*Visitation will be held at the funeral home with the Vigil for the Deceased being held at (time)/ Mass of Christian Burial will be celebrated at.../ Immediately following Mass Committal Services will be held at...*

e. Depending upon local needs someone other than the celebrant of the Funeral Mass may preside at the Committal Service. In the Diocese of Wilmington, the preference is for a permanent deacon or a trained lay minister to officiate at the committal service.

f. The practice of separating the Funeral Mass and Committal by attending a luncheon or reception is not appropriate. Lunches and receptions are to be scheduled after the committal prayers at the cemetery whenever possible.



**Office of Worship  
Diocese of Wilmington**

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