

THE CATHOLIC FUNERAL

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. ~ Titus 3:4-7

WHEN A PARENT, spouse, child, sibling, or other family member, or a friend, neighbor, or colleague dies, we respond with grief or sorrow, and sometimes even with anger at their “leaving us.” The separation may involve acute loneliness, a sense of lost opportunities, a broken family circle, and a feeling of sadness that touches every part of life.

For the person who has no hope of life in Heaven, the sorrow can be crushingly bleak. The one who has died is never expected to be seen or heard again, and fond memories can be at best a band-aid on an open wound of the heart. But the Christian whose hope is in the Lord trusts in his promise of immortality. We can hope, with deep assurance, to see God ourselves one day and to meet again those whom we have loved in this life. The Catholic funeral liturgy is the expression of our firm faith in our Lord’s promise that he has prepared a place for us and will take us to himself (see Jn 14:2-3).

For the faithful Christian, death is the only door to eternal life. Although death would not have entered the world if our first parents had not sinned (see Wis 2:24; Rom 5:12), the saving acts of Jesus’ Paschal mystery have conquered death, making it not something to be feared but an event to be welcomed as the passage to eternal life, however difficult and pain-filled that passage might be: *“O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?”* (1 Cor 15:55).



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“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom 6:3-5). Christians do not see this life as “all there is,” *“[f]or here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come”* (Heb 13:14), the Heavenly Jerusalem. Living a life

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of faith and virtue, especially the virtue of charity, and receiving the sacraments worthily

are the preparation for entrance into glory.

In this life, we are as children in the womb of our Mother the Church. Death is birth into eternal life, and the Church accompanies us as we complete the process. At a Catholic funeral, Christ’s Paschal mystery is proclaimed, we are taught to remember the dead, we express our hope of being gathered together as God’s family in his Kingdom, we are encouraged to give witness by our lives to our faith as Christians, and we look for the fulfillment of God’s promises, when *“he will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away”* (Rv 21:4).

A Catholic funeral consists of three parts: the Vigil for the Deceased, the funeral Mass, and the Committal. The Vigil for the Deceased can take place at the home

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of the deceased, a funeral home, or the church itself if well before the funeral Mass. The purpose of the vigil is to turn to God’s Word as our source of faith and hope in a time of loss. At the vigil, we the Christian community “keeps watch” with the family in prayer, and find strength in our communal prayer. We seek God’s mercy for the deceased, and we receive consolation from God’s presence. Most of all, we express our belief in eternal life and in the resurrection of the body. One of the prayers during the vigil reads as follows:

“Lord our God, the death of our brother/sister N. recalls our human condition and the brevity of our lives on earth. But for those who believe in your love death is not the end, nor does it destroy the bonds that you forge in our lives. We share the faith of your Son’s disciples and the hope of the children of God. Bring the light of Christ’s Resurrection to this time of testing and pain as we pray for N. and for those who love him/her, through Christ our Lord” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 72).

The funeral Mass is the most significant celebration of the Christian community for the deceased. The most prominent themes of the liturgy are those of Christ’s Resurrection, when he defeated sin and death, commending the deceased to God’s mercy, and seeking strength for ourselves in Christ’s Paschal mystery. We recall how we share in Christ’s death and Resurrection through our Baptism and look forward to our own resurrection, and we express hope that we will all be united in God’s Kingdom. One of the Opening Prayers reads as follows:

“O God, to whom mercy and forgiveness belong, hear our prayers on behalf of your servant N., whom you have called out of this world; and because he/she put his/her hope and trust in you, command that he/she be carried safely home to Heaven and come to enjoy your eternal reward” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 160).

The selection of readings — one from the Old Testament, a Psalm, a reading from the New Testament other than the Gospel, and the Gospel — should reflect the themes described above, and the hymns and songs should be carefully chosen as well. Neither ornate homilies nor extended eulogies are permissible, for the funeral is not intended to showcase the deceased’s life but to “illumine the mystery of Christian death in the light of the risen Christ” (CCC 1688).



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At the conclusion of the Mass, there is a final commendation. In the invitation to prayer, the celebrant says: “Before we go our separate ways, let us take leave of our brother/sister. May our farewell express our affection for him/her; may it ease our sadness and strengthen our hope. One day we shall joyfully greet him/her again when the love of Christ, which conquers all things, destroys even death itself” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 171). He then prays over the deceased: “Into your hands, Father of mercies, we commend our brother/sister N. in the sure and certain hope that, together with all who have died in Christ, he/she will rise with him on the last day. Merciful Lord, turn toward us and listen to our prayers: open the gates of paradise to your servant and help us who remain to comfort one another with assurances of faith, until we all meet in Christ and are with you and with our brother/sister for ever. We ask this through Christ our Lord” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 175).

The third part of a Catholic funeral, the Committal, takes place at the cemetery or other location

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Resurrection, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

where the body of the deceased is interred. (Options other than interment are permissible in appropriate circumstances, such as burial at sea.) The sure hope of the resurrection of the body is expressed when the celebrant prays: “Because God has chosen to

call our brother/sister N. from this life to himself, we commit his/her body to the earth, for we are dust and unto dust we shall return. But the Lord Jesus Christ will change our mortal bodies to be like his in glory, for he is risen, the firstborn from the dead. So let us commend our brother/sister to the Lord, that the Lord may embrace him/her in peace and raise up his/her body on the last day” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 219). The Church reverences the body even after death, because we as human beings are a body-soul composite and we await the glorification of the body when it is rejoined to the soul after its resurrection. For this reason, the Church prefers interment of the intact body. It permits cremation only when the purpose is not opposed to the teachings of the Church, and in no cases is “scattering of the ashes” permitted, however reverently this might be done.

The grief of the bereaved is also acknowledged at the Committal when the celebrant prays: “Merciful Lord, you know the anguish of the sorrowful, you are attentive to the prayers of the humble. Hear your people who cry out to you in their need, and strengthen their hope in your lasting goodness. We ask this through Christ our Lord” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 223). The Committal concludes with the celebrant praying: “Eternal rest grant unto him/her, O Lord,” to which those gathered respond: “And let perpetual light shine upon him/her.” The priest continues: “May he/she rest in peace,” to which those gathered respond, “Amen.” The priest concludes: “May his/her soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace,” to which everyone again responds, “Amen” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 223).

(CCC 1680-1690)