

THE DIOCESE OF SASKATOON

# GUIDELINES FOR THE CELEBRATIONS OF FUNERALS AND BURIALS



*"If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will  
certainly be united to him in a resurrection like his."*

**Romans 6:3-5**

# INTRODUCTION

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St. Paul presents the core of the Christian faith which the Church celebrates in the funeral rites of her children. With confident faith in Jesus who proclaims, "I am the Resurrection," Christ's Church intercedes for the deceased who have passed from life into death and await the Resurrection. Catholic funeral rites are the worship of God by a community which accompanies a brother or sister into the mystery of their death with eyes lovingly fixed upon Christ. The victory of Christ over death through His own death and Resurrection is the Life that we celebrate.

## DEATH AND CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

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The reality of human death and the events that surround it call for a pastoral and compassionate response from the community. The deceased are lifted up in prayer to their Saviour and Redeemer. Indeed, "though separated from the living, the dead are still at one with the community of believers on earth and benefit from their prayers and intercession." Families overwhelmed by sorrow at the time of death receive great spiritual and prayerful support from relatives, friends and the community of the faithful both on earth and in heaven.

The Church's rites have developed over two thousand years into richly meaningful services that Christians find so comforting. More than mere words or sentiment, these prayers, gestures, songs, and - most of all the Eucharist - lift a grieving family from mourning into hope. The Holy Spirit of God makes the Risen Christ present in these funeral rites - and it is into His arms that the Church commends those who have died.

*The following guidelines are offered to assist pastors and parish communities in the celebrations of Christian funerals. References will be made to the Code of Canon Law and to the Canadian Catholic Conference of Bishops' publication "Order of Christian Funerals" (OCF).*

## There is a pattern to this ancient celebration:

- **A Vigil Service of Prayer:** remembering, mourning, Christian sorrow,
- **A Funeral Service of Prayer:** uniting the one who has died with the sacrifice of Christ that destroys death, giving thanks for Jesus and for the life of the deceased, and solemnly saying goodbye in prayer,
- **An Interment Service of Prayer:** respectfully bringing the earthly remains of the deceased to the place of rest to await the Resurrection of the body, with the community often returning to share memories and a meal.

## PLACE OF FUNERALS

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The funeral of a deceased member of the faithful should normally be celebrated in the church of that person's proper parish (Canon 1177 §1). However, if the choice is made to celebrate the rites in a different church, this requires the consent of the pastor and a notification to the proper parish priest of the deceased (Canon 1177 §2).

## THE VIGIL SERVICE

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There are two human experiences that emerge in the face of the death of a loved one: grieving and mourning. People grieve individually in ways that are not always visible to others in a gradual process of learning to live with the loss of an irreplaceable presence. People also need to mourn - to express their sadness and loss together. This "togetherness" features empathy, compassion, and hope. In that spirit, families of the deceased are encouraged to gather and pray prior to the celebration of the Mass of Christian Burial.

The Wake or Vigil Prayer may take the form of one of the vigil services contained in the Order of Christian Funerals. Elements such as the praying of the Rosary after the service may be added. This service generally happens the evening preceding the funeral and while it is generally held in the church, it may for pastoral reasons take place in a funeral home or at the home of the deceased.

# MASS OF CHRISTIAN BURIAL (FUNERAL MASS)

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The Mass - namely the memorial sacrifice of Christ's death and Resurrection - is the foundation of a Catholic's spiritual life and so it is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral. In the Mass, the Church on earth is united with the Church in heaven in one great prayer offering to God that Jesus commanded His people to celebrate.

Unless there are very serious reasons, no baptized Catholic is to be deprived of the celebration of the Funeral Mass upon their death. The Funeral Mass is customarily celebrated on the day of burial. However, for pastoral reasons the Mass may be celebrated at some other time before the burial, such as the previous evening. There is to be only one Funeral Mass.

- The Funeral Mass is to be celebrated in a church or approved sacred chapel or site. The Mass may not be celebrated in a funeral home or other such facility.
- The body of the deceased should be present in the church for the celebration of the Mass of Christian Burial.
- While choices for music and readings should reflect the wishes of the family, all music choices should be Christian in nature with a strong emphasis on the promise of the Resurrection. Ideally, all music choices should come from an approved hymnal. Likewise, the choice of biblical readings should come from those suggested for use by the Lectionary for Votive and Ritual Masses.
- The casket is to be placed near the front of the Church within close proximity of the Paschal candle. A white pall is to be placed on the casket as a reminder of the baptismal garment. A cross and/or Bible may be placed on top of the pall. Flowers and other items are not to be placed on the pall. Pastoral consideration is to be shown for First Nations and Indigenous individuals whose families desire the use of the star blanket, and for military personnel whose families desire the use of the Canadian flag. In such cases, it is permissible for the blanket or flag to be placed on one end of the casket.



- The casket is to remain closed during the entirety of the Mass of Christian Burial.
- Liturgical ministries such as proclaiming the Word, reading the intercessions and processing the gifts for the Eucharist are ordinarily fulfilled by Catholics. Non-Catholics may serve as pallbearers.
- Families may request Holy Communion under both species and in such cases, the pastor should ensure that if Extraordinary Ministers of Communion are required they are duly appointed within the parish to assist with this ministry.
- Apart from distinctions based on sacred orders and the respect due to civic dignitaries, no special honours are paid to any private person or class of persons, whether in the ceremony or by external display.

## **WORDS OF REMEMBRANCE: EULOGY**

At the death of a loved one, there is a strong human need to honour and recall the life of the deceased, their legacy, accomplishments, and impact on their family and community. This beautiful impulse is right and proper. At the same time, however, it is not the primary focus of the Funeral Mass, which instead focuses on a person's entry into everlasting life and the saving power of the life, death, and Resurrection of Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Therefore, "words of remembrance" or "eulogies" for the beloved dead are instead to be delivered at times outside the Funeral Mass itself.

According to the Order of Christian Funerals, "a brief homily based on the readings is always given after the Gospel reading, but there is never to be a eulogy." The homily relates Christian death to the Paschal Mystery of our Lord's death and Resurrection. The homily should include an expression of praise and gratitude to God for the gift of Christian life and for such virtues or strengths apparent in the life of the deceased. Pastors should make it a priority to meet and spend time with the deceased's family members in order to grow in the knowledge of the life of the deceased and how this might find its way into the homily.

“Words of remembrance” or “the eulogy” may take place at other times, in the following order of preference:

- At the end of the vigil service as indicated in the Order of Christian Funerals,
- Before the Funeral Mass begins,
- After the celebration of the Funeral Mass if burial is delayed,
- Following the prayers of committal at the cemetery,
- At the funeral luncheon.

If the words of remembrance are to be offered in the church, the officiating priest should meet with the speaker beforehand and review their written text to ensure it is appropriate for delivery in the church. If shared in the church worship space, eulogies are not to be long and are not to be accompanied by media. Generally, it is preferred that only one person would speak, and this individual should be of upright reputation. In all things, the eulogist is to remember that if offered in church, the eulogy is to be understood as an act of worship of God and any elements that do not give expression to this act of worship do not have a place.

## **FUNERALS OF NON CATHOLIC CHRISTIANS**

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When requested by the family of a deceased baptized non-Catholic, a priest may conduct a prayer service for a non-Catholic in a funeral home. In particular circumstances where the deceased non-Catholic was a Christian well disposed to the Church, and the family requests the celebration of a Funeral Mass, it may be celebrated with the body present in the church.

# FUNERAL LITURGIES WITHOUT THE CELEBRATION OF THE MASS

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After discerning with the family of the deceased that a serious reason exists, the pastor may offer a funeral liturgy without the celebration of the Mass. The Order of Christian Funerals (§459) provides the following reasons for deciding upon such a liturgy:

- When the Funeral Mass is not permitted (on solemnities of obligation, on Holy Thursday and Easter Triduum, on the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and Easter),
- When in some places or circumstances it is not possible to celebrate the Funeral Mass before the committal (for instance, if a priest is not available),
- When for pastoral reasons the presiding ministers and the family members judge that the funeral liturgy outside Mass is a more suitable form of celebration (Order of Christian Funerals §349).

When the choice is made for such a service, the body should be present. The funeral liturgy without a Mass is generally celebrated at the parish church but may be celebrated in the home of the deceased, a funeral home, or a cemetery chapel. Even though a Funeral Mass may not be celebrated as part of the funeral rites in these situations, a Requiem Mass may be offered at another time for the repose of the soul of the deceased and for the spiritual well-being of the relatives, friends and faith community members. The choice of readings and music follow the same guidelines as those used when there is a Mass of Christian Burial.

# RITE OF COMMITTAL

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The service at the cemetery is the last farewell, in which the Christian community honors one of its members before the body is buried or entombed. It is always desirable that the rite takes place at the open grave site or at the columbarium if the deceased has been cremated.

A hymn or liturgical song may be used at the conclusion of the rite to affirm our firm hope in God's mercy and in the resurrection of the dead. (OCF §388) The rite explains that it is permissible for some gestures of final leave-taking to take place at the graveside, such as placing flowers or soil on the coffin. (OCF §383)

# PLACE OF BURIAL

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Whenever possible, those who were part of a Catholic community should be buried in a Catholic cemetery. Where no Catholic cemetery exists, internment in another cemetery is permitted, and the priest will bless the individual space and follow the usual ritual.

# FUNERAL OFFERINGS

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An offering to the parish for funeral services is customary and may be suggested according to the approved diocesan schedule for such offerings. However, care must be taken to also provide free-of-charge funeral services for those not able to afford such offerings.



# CREMATION

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The history of the practice of burial or entombment of a deceased has long been part of the Church's ritual and follows in the manner of Christ's own burial. Central to the Christian faith is our belief that our bodies like that of Christ will be raised to life on the Last Day. Therefore, our funeral rites presume the presence of the body to express respect for the human body as a member of Christ's Body and to witness faith in the resurrection of the body. The Code of Canon Law (c.1176 §3) states: "the Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burial be retained: but it does not forbid cremation unless this is chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching."

If cremation is to occur, it is desirable that cremation take place after the celebration of the Mass of Christian Burial. However, for pastoral reasons and in particular situations, the cremation may take place prior to the Funeral Mass. There are specific rituals to accompany the process of cremation (found in the CCCB Publication, Celebrations with Cremated Remains (A Supplement to the Order of Christian Funerals) that funeral homes should arrange with pastors.

When cremated remains are present at the Mass of Christian Burial, pastors should avail themselves of Celebrations with Cremated Remains and follow the prescribed ritual. Of particular note are these instructions from the CCCB:

- For the funeral liturgy, a small table covered with a white cloth is prepared for the cremated remains near the altar. The cremated remains are never placed on or immediately in front of the altar.
- The vessel containing the cremated remains may be either put on the table before the liturgy begins or carried in.
- If the vessel is carried in: this is to be done with dignity and reverence in the Entrance Procession. The person carrying the cremated remains follows the presider. The mourners may follow.
- If the cremated remains are placed on the table beforehand: after the people have assembled, the funeral liturgy begins. The presiding minister greets the mourners informally, or with the words provided in the ritual book.

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It is recommended that a pall specially designed for vessels containing cremated remains be placed at the beginning of the funeral liturgy and removed after the Final Commendation. Except for a pall, nothing should be next to the cremated remains in the church.

In Canada, it is often the custom to place a picture of the deceased near the vessel of the cremated remains, this is appropriate during visitation at the funeral home. During the funeral liturgy, which is an act of worship and thanksgiving to God, it is preferable that pictures not be displayed. Pictures can be displayed at a reception following the funeral.

Special care must be given to ensure the presence of liturgical symbols such as the Easter candle, holy water and incense.

Out of profound respect for the human body and for the deceased, the Church teaches that cremated remains should never be scattered. The cremated remains of a beloved family member are not to be incorporated into pendants or artisanal works. These precious remains should be placed in their entirety in a secure vessel and buried in a grave or inurned in a columbarium as soon as possible. As always, burial in a Catholic cemetery is preferred. Disposing of, scattering, or keeping cremated remains in family homes is not in keeping with Catholic respect for the deceased.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that “from the beginning, the Church has honoured the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead” (CCC par. 1032)*

# **FURTHER PASTORAL NOTES ON PARTICULAR CIRCUMSTANCES**

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The celebration of Christian funeral rites presents a tremendous opportunity for evangelization. Recognizing that many of the faithful are not catechized and that our contemporary culture is experiencing a general lessening of respect and reverence for the reality of death and burial of the human body, these further thoughts and guidelines might assist pastors and parish representatives as they journey with grieving families.

Pastors and lay parish leadership are encouraged to offer regular (once yearly) informational evenings for individuals to learn about funeral planning, options for liturgies, expectations of the family and the Church community, cremation, etc. Parishioners should be encouraged to pre-plan their funeral in order to fulfill their wishes after death. A particular occasion for this is during the November month-long honouring of the faithful departed.

There are some families who desire to have a service at either the funeral home or cemetery. Care should be taken to speak to them of the beauty of the Church liturgies and rituals. Pastors are reminded that the Mass of Christian Burial may only be celebrated in a church. Services at funeral homes and cemeteries must be without the Mass.

Pastors are encouraged to offer catechesis on the importance of the fullness of the funeral rites which include both the Vigil Prayer and Mass of Christian Burial. Each year there are more requests to have only the Funeral Mass.

Words of remembrance or eulogy are permitted at the prescribed time at the Vigil, prior to the Funeral Mass, after the Funeral Mass if burial is delayed, after the Rites of Committal at the cemetery or at the funeral lunch. Pastors may request a written copy of the Words of Remembrance to ensure the suitability and to assure the avoidance of scandal, and to ask for changes if this is deemed necessary.

Non-religious objects must not be placed in or near the sanctuary. These include but are not limited to toys, balloons, sports jerseys, photo collages and work-related objects. These items can be placed on display tables in the Area of Welcome in the church or in the hall or place where the lunch will be served.

Pastors should provide catechesis to the faithful on the preference that the body be present for the funeral rites but why in particular cases the presence of cremated remains is permitted. If cremated remains are present, then the officiating priest is to use the ritual from the official CCCB publication, *Celebrating with Cremated Remains* (A Supplement to the Order of Christian Funerals.)

Pastors are reminded of the great importance of meeting with the family members of the deceased to assure them of prayer and support and to assist them with the planning of meaningful liturgies. Parishes are encouraged to have Bereavement and Funeral Committees.

Families in need of funeral liturgies are asked to first contact the parish to inquire about the availability of priests and parish facilities. Funeral Directors are asked to assist the priests and parishes in this matter. Pastors have responsibility for all the circumstances of the liturgies.

A growing number of families ask to have a priest present because the deceased was Roman Catholic but they themselves have no desire to have a Catholic liturgy. Pastors should try as much as possible to engage such wishes while recognizing the great opportunity for catechesis and evangelization. Pastoral sensitivity is required when presiding at funerals of First Nations and Indigenous People. Pastors should be open to cultural realities that are part of the family's grieving process, such as the wake, feasts, star blankets, and smudging.

The family of deceased military and peace officers are entitled to have the Canadian flag placed on the coffin. This can be done when the coffin is being transported to and from the church where the main funeral liturgy is to be celebrated. The flag (which should be a suitable size) can then be removed and folded with appropriate ceremony and respect just before the pall is to be placed on the coffin during the welcoming of the body.

The flag then becomes part of the ritual action in the liturgy. The pall will be removed after the liturgy, and the flag can again be placed on the coffin as it is being transported out of the church. Other military items (berets, medals) must not be placed on the casket nor displayed in the church sanctuary.

For military who may request burial at sea, there are specific instructions for this in the Order of Christian Funerals.

Funeral offerings are directed to the parish. Families are also encouraged to provide stipends for musicians and soloists. Families in difficult financial situations who cannot afford to make an offering must never be denied the celebration of a Christian funeral. Suggested offerings are determined by the parish in accordance with diocesan policies. It is highly desirable that Funeral Directors not "include" church services in their charges but convey clear expectations to the families about funeral offerings.

At all liturgies, with or without the Mass, there is to be live music that is religious in nature and preferably from an approved church hymnal. The use of non-religious music is discouraged during the liturgy. Such music can instead be played or sung outside of the liturgy, such as at the lunch.

All readings are to be from the Sacred Scriptures. Suggestions for readings can be found in the Lectionary for Votive Masses. Suggestions for the Prayers of the Faithful can be found in the Order of Christian Funerals.

Pastors and faith communities are reminded that burying the dead is a Corporal Work of Mercy. To stand in solidarity with those who grieve is a Christian witness with long historical roots. Here again, funeral and bereavement committees and programs of personal and pastoral care are particularly helpful.

