

Archdiocese of Glasgow

A Pastoral Guide to the Order of Christian Funerals

Draft for Council of Priests (October 2010)

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 its 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.”¹
2. We celebrate the rites of the Christian funeral to offer worship, praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life. The Christian community prays for the person who has died asking for the forgiveness of sin and the gift of everlasting life. Such a celebration in the context of the worshipping community brings consolation to the bereaved through the witness to Christian hope in the resurrection.

Community:

¹ General Introduction to the Order of Christian Funerals, 4.

3. Celebrations of the Church always take place within the worshipping community which at the time of a funeral celebration fulfils a ministry of consolation to the bereaved. This is expressed in active participation at the Vigil for the deceased, the funeral Mass and the rite of committal.²
4. Whenever possible, the priest should involve a family in preparing the funeral celebration: in choosing readings for the liturgy of the Word, the hymns to be sung and the various ways in which both family and parishioners can participate. The priest should take care to explain what is involved in the funeral liturgy and the meaning and significance of the rites celebrated by the Church. It is through these rites that the Church shows its care for the dead and the continuous prayer of the community of faith.

Preparing the Liturgy for the Christian Funeral

5. “The time immediately following death is often one of bewilderment and may involve shock or heartrending grief for the family and close friends. The ministry of the Church at this time is one of gently accompanying the mourners in their initial adjustment to the fact of death and to the sorrow this entails.”³

A priest will always seek to help and guide the mourners. As the above quotation states, the Church (priest and people of the parish) are to accompany with sensitivity those who are grieving as they face the reality of the death of a loved one. The time

² Ibid. 11

³ Ibid. 52

between death and the funeral can often be very difficult: breaking the news to relatives and friends; arranging the funeral; supplying necessary documentation. Friends, the priest, the funeral director, people in the parish are there to help and support those mourning. When planning for a funeral to take place, those responsible should contact the parish clergy prior to making any arrangements with a funeral director.

6. Often at times of preparing for funerals people express a sentiment such as, “It is our relative’s funeral, why can’t we just do what we like?” Sometimes people misunderstand that the liturgy is the Church’s prayer, and while there are several options available, there are also principles to be followed. The priest is responsible for ensuring that the liturgy of the Church is celebrated well and will guide the mourners toward this.

a. Vigil for the deceased

7. “At the vigil, the Christian community keeps watch with the family in prayer to the God of mercy and finds strength in Christ’s presence. It is the first occasion among the funeral rites for the solemn reading of the word. In this time of loss, the family and community turn to God’s word as the source of faith and hope, as light and life in the face of darkness and death.”⁴
8. Very often, the vigil will be the first opportunity for family and friends along with the worshipping community to come together to express their concern for the family of the deceased gathering

in prayer. The priest will explain the custom of the parish in celebrating the vigil for the deceased and the signs and symbols which are used in this celebration. The vigil will normally consist of introductory rites followed by a liturgy of the Word, prayer of intercession and a concluding rite. In some parishes, this may be replaced by the Office for the Dead.

9. Family members may be invited to place the pall cloth and Christian symbols on the coffin of the deceased. Flowers or photographs should not be placed on top of the coffin. Flags, likewise, have no place in the funeral liturgy.⁵
10. Music is integral to every celebration in the Church. Well chosen music can touch those present and enliven the faith of the community gathered to express their hope in the resurrection. In the choice of music for this celebration, preference should be given to an opening hymn (from the parish hymn book) and responsorial psalm. The litany and a closing hymn may also be sung.⁶ Secular Music plays no part in the celebration of a Christian funeral.
11. It is permissible for a member of the family to speak in remembrance of the deceased at the Vigil. This should be subject to approval by the priest and should be seen by him beforehand. Words of remembrance should not be delivered from the ambo.

⁴ Ibid. 74

⁵ Ibid. 38

⁶ Ibid. 86

b. Funeral Mass

12. "When one of its members dies, the Church encourages the celebration of Mass."⁷

Whether Mass is celebrated or not, the Church focuses on the story of Jesus. What we celebrate in the Church is the hope Christ's death and resurrection holds for us, particularly the fullness of life promised to the one who has died. With this in mind, any funeral Mass is celebrated with Christ's story in the first place. Any booklets printed for the assembly to use should be entitled "Funeral Mass" instead of "in celebration of the life of..."

13. Readings carefully chosen from the Word of God should help to clarify the reality of this hope. Members of the family may be invited to choose scripture readings from the lectionary which are appropriate to the Christian funeral. In some parishes where there are a large number of funerals celebrated, the readings of the day may be preferred so that the assembly who gather daily hear the continuous reading of God's Word. This may also be preferred during the Seasons of Advent, Lent, Easter, etc and on feast days and solemnities during the Church's year. These readings may not be replaced by non-biblical readings.

14. The Word of God is the basis for the homily which is then given. Based on the word proclaimed, the homilist should reflect on God's mercy and compassion and the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection in the life and death of the Christian. This should not take the form of a eulogy, although the preacher may include some elements of the deceased life of faith.⁸

15. Carefully chosen music should express the Paschal Mystery of the Lord's suffering, death and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture.⁹ Hymns chosen for the Funeral Mass should ordinarily come from the parish hymnal and should be well known by the assembly. Where possible, the psalm should be sung. The acclamations of the Mass should also be chosen from the parish repertoire in order that those present may participate as fully as possible. Songs from the entertainment world are never appropriate in the church, nor does the church possess the necessary copyright permission.

16. Should the family desire to print a booklet for the assembly's use, this should be agreed with the priest who will desire to see the text before it is printed. Copyright permission should be acknowledged in any printed material (an appropriate license should be held by the parish for this purpose, e.g. Calamus, CCLI, etc. and the number used on any printed materials along with the Scottish Charity number).

⁷ Ibid. 163

⁸ General Instruction of the Roman Missal 382

⁹ General Introduction to the Order of Christian Funerals 30

17. Care should be taken to ensure the dignified and appropriate use of the symbols of the liturgy (e.g. water and incense, appropriate liturgical gestures, processions and the use of silence).
18. The final part of the church service is the Final Commendation, which is the prayerful and hope-filled prayer of the community. The priest offers prayers which express both the sadness and parting and the hope of future reunion. During this time, the coffin is sprinkled with holy water to remind us once more of the promise of everlasting life given at Baptism. It is also incensed to show the respect and reverence due to the human body. A final prayer is offered to return this life to God and then the coffin is taken from the church to its final resting place. Appropriate music, such as the *Song of Farewell*, may be sung during these rites. Parishes are encouraged to develop a repertoire of good liturgical music to accompany these rites. There is no final blessing at this point, as the liturgy continues at the cemetery or crematorium.

Committal at a Cemetery or Crematorium

19. The funeral liturgy concludes at the cemetery or crematorium. Despite time constraints, especially at a crematorium, this should not be rushed and due reverence should be given to the celebration.
20. Since the liturgy celebrated at the cemetery or crematorium is a continuation of the funeral rites begun at the church, the same principles apply to the celebration. In fact, as the Order of

Christian Funerals states, live music would always be preferred to recorded music and where recorded music is used, good quality liturgical music should be supplied.¹⁰

21. The participation of mourners is also possible at a cemetery or crematorium. At the cemetery it is normal custom for mourners to add soil to the grave of the deceased. At a crematorium, mourners may be invited to sprinkle the coffin with water. These final gestures of leave-taking encourage the bereaved to recognise the seeds of hope contained within the prayer of the liturgy.

Committal when no other liturgy has taken place

22. The Order of Christian Funerals foresees occasions when a funeral service takes place only at a cemetery or crematorium. This may be the case where family members are not catholic or do not regard themselves as religious. Pastoral care in these circumstances is important and the priest or deacon should be able to bring out the hope that the Christian Faith offers in the face of the death of a loved one.
23. It may be the case that financial restrictions (for example a funeral arranged by Social Services or a nursing home) may be the reason given for a funeral only at a cemetery or crematorium.

¹⁰ Ibid. 235.

Clergy should exercise pastoral care in ensuring that a funeral Mass is still the preferred option in this case.

24. The celebration at a cemetery chapel or crematorium remains the Church's liturgy and should be prepared according to the principles outlined above. The place of celebration should be suitably prepared with a crucifix and candles¹¹ in order to establish a Christian environment.

25. The liturgy for such a celebration should include the receiving of the body, a liturgy of the word, final commendation and prayers for committal. The Order of Christian Funerals provides this liturgy. Again, since this is a liturgical celebration, the Word of God is an essential element and liturgical music is appropriate to this setting. Secular music does not have a place within the liturgy.

¹¹ Ibid. 234