

## **When Someone You Loved Has Died: Preparing for a Funeral**

Fr. Columbia McCann O.S.B. takes us through organizing the honouring of a deceased Roman Catholic through the Funeral Liturgies of the Church.

The trauma of losing someone close is very deep and leaves us disoriented. Depending on the circumstances, the death of a loved one can leave us feeling numb, shocked, exhausted, angry, relieved, depressed, or a combination of any of these. Trying to organize a funeral in the middle of all this is not easy.

Thankfully, there are people around to help: your local priest, your local funeral director, a Parish Funeral Ministry Team, friends and neighbours. Priests, Funeral Ministry Teams and funeral directors have long experience of helping people when a death occurs and will give you the advice and support that you need.

What follows is intended as a brief guide to help you choose what is best for the funeral of a loved one. First there is a brief description of the principal rites at the time of a funeral, and then some general advice about planning.

### Remembering the Dead: The Wake or Vigil

Funerals are a time for remembering. We can feel an urge to tell the story of the one who has passed away. Stories about the good times and the bad surface and want to be told. We reminisce. This is something natural and healthy and deserves a bit of time and space.

A rite called the 'Vigil for the Deceased' has been put together. It offers an opportunity for family and friends to gather for prayer in the presence of the body of the person who has died. It usually takes place in a funeral home. It includes readings and prayers that evoke our hope in the resurrection as well as giving voice to the pain of what has happened. It is a moment of entrusting ourselves and our loved one who has died to the care of Christ himself. Sometimes, if people wish, it could include the rosary or a portion of it. All the prayers can be led by a lay person or a religious or a priest. At the end of the prayers people might want to voice some personal remembrances of the person who has died, perhaps to read a poem or any other text that was dear to the deceased, tell some stories or to hear some favourite music. This kind of remembrance takes place more easily and naturally at a small gathering rather than at a funeral Mass, which tends to be more public and formal.

If you would like to use some of the material from the Vigil for the Deceased, ask your local Funeral Ministry Team or priest.

### Who Should Read the Readings?

If you really want people to hear the message of the readings which you have chosen, you need to have someone who is experienced at reading in public. Inexperienced readers sometimes think they can be clearly heard and understood, but because they have no training, much of what they read is lost. It is best to pick someone who already reads at Mass, a friend, relative, or better still, one of the regular parish readers (the priest or funeral team should be able to track one down for you.)

One piece of advice: a person who was very close to the one who has died may be put under quite a strain, trying to read in public, so close family may not be the best candidates. They need support and care rather than additional burdens. If you want to involve family members and other chief mourners in a prominent way in the liturgy, choose other ways instead of reading. You will see a number of examples later on.

### The Funeral Mass

The Funeral Mass is normally the principal element of the whole funeral. The greatest gift we can give a person is to remember them at Mass and to unite our prayers for them with the self-offering of Jesus which is at the heart of the Mass. Perhaps it should also be said that Mass is not always the ideal service for everyone. If, for example, the Mass had no real significance for the person who died or for the chief mourners, then it could be very artificial for them to go through a ceremony that means little for them. Asking for a funeral Mass is not just a matter of using the church building for an hour or so, but of asking to be part of the Christian community as it gathers to worship Jesus Christ. The principal focus in the funeral Mass will be on Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection are solemnly commemorated and made present under the signs of bread and wine. If this is not the focus you want for your loved one's funeral, then you might want to talk to your priest about arranging a different kind of service.

The Mass is there as a wonderful help to you and your loved one who has died. At Mass the Christian community will pray for you, that you will receive the strength and care you need to live through your grief. Most importantly, the whole liturgy

proclaims Jesus Christ who was crucified, died and rose from the dead and prays that each one of us, in our own way, will share in his triumph over death.

### The Word of God

The Word of God, proclaimed in the Scripture readings is a fundamental element of the Mass. Through these readings from Scripture, we hear the voice of Christ himself. He has the message of love and hope for us most especially in the bleak experience of death. Because of the importance of the Scriptures, we don't have any other readings at this point of the Mass. You may have other prayers or texts that you think are very relevant to the death of your loved one.

Don't include them among the scripture readings. Instead, you might ask the Parish Funeral Team or priest to use them when he preaches, or you might consider reading them at the end of Mass. Another possible time is at the end of the Vigil, as described above.

Who should read? Pick an experienced reader who is not too close to the person who died. Getting up to read is difficult enough without having to worry about whether you are going to break down and cry.

What readings should be picked? Again, the Parish funeral team or priest will give you all the help you want there.

### Prayer of the Faithful

Together the whole gathering of people prays for the needs of the whole Church and for people throughout the world. At a Funeral Mass, this will of course include special prayers for the person who has died and all those who mourn their passing. Sometimes the prayer intentions are read by the priest, but again, there is the preferable option of having a lay reader read them. Again, it is a good idea to have a reader who is experienced and who will not be put under a strain at this moment.

### Preparation of the Gifts

The gifts of bread and wine are carried forward and presented to the priest. This is an ideal moment to involve family members or others among the chief mourners – it is a significant action in the Mass, and yet easily performed. You could also include among these gifts some kind of donation to a charity or worthy cause which was dear to the person who died. If you want to symbolize their life through various objects, it is better to put them on display somewhere in the church.

## Sharing in the Eucharist

The true heart of the funeral Mass is our sharing in the Eucharist. We do this by entering into the great prayer of the Mass, the Eucharistic Prayer. The priest recites this prayer, but he does so in the name of everyone present. We join in by praying silently but also by singing or saying out loud the various acclamations that are part of the prayer: The Holy, Holy, the Memorial Acclamation, and the Great Amen. The other moment is the sharing in Holy Communion.

Those who are prevented from receiving (for example, non-Catholics) might present themselves and ask the priest for a blessing instead.

## The Final Commendation

The Mass concludes with a solemn and moving ritual through which we commend our loved one to God's love. Before we go our separate ways, we pray for the person who has died and honour their remains with special signs: we sprinkle the casket with blessed water, as a reminder of Baptism, and we use incense as a sign of honour to their body, which was a temple of the Holy Spirit. When this rite has been completed, we all process together through the church and eventually make our way to the place of burial or cremation.

## The Burial or Cremation

This moment is called the 'committal', when we finally commit the body of our loved one to the dust from which it was made, either by burial or cremation. It can be a harrowing, but important moment, and should not be rushed over. We need to take time with this moment of 'goodbye', and even linger for a while. When a person is buried, the priest can sprinkle some earth on the casket. It might be a good idea for each of the chief mourners to do the same, perhaps at the end of the ceremony. Another gesture of farewell is possible at cremation, for example, sprinkling the casket with Holy Water. The short readings and prayers which accompany this solemn moment of the funeral will strengthen all who are present.

## Some General Points

The following points may help summarize what is needed:

- This first thing is not to worry about the arrangements. All the material above may seem rather detailed, but in practice the priest and funeral director will guide you through it. Don't feel you have to do everything. The priest and other ministers are there to look after you

- After a death has occurred, people sometimes feel under pressure to have the Mass and burial as soon as possible. If possible, avoid the temptation to rush things
- You may wish to involve family members or other chief mourners in the celebrations in a special way. Give them some of the simpler tasks: placing of Christian symbols, bringing up the gifts at Mass, sprinkling earth on the casket at the cemetery. You may also involve a lot of people in a more informal way by gathering for prayer (Vigil for the Deceased) and reflection at the funeral home. This is an ideal time for favourite songs, prayers, poems and stories.
- The readings of any texts in the church itself is more demanding and is best given to someone who will not be too distraught, preferably an experienced church reader
- Music can add greatly to the meaningful celebration of a funeral. In the church itself, use only religious music that has been written for the liturgy. Your local priest will be able to contact those who have the ministry of music in the parish. Some parishes have congregational singing at the funeral Mass, which is the best way to have it. Ask if this is feasible.
- You might find it helpful to have other significant moments in the weeks and months ahead when you remember your loved one in a special way: a month's Anniversary Mass, visits to the cemetery, the annual parish Mass for the Deceased in November (see Upcoming Events tab on this website), putting up a monument, and the first anniversary. These could be moments when you gather with just a few people to pray and remember.