



Roman Catholic Church in the State of Hawaii  
Diocese of Honolulu



## Understanding our Catholic Funeral Rites

Our Catholic funeral rites are intended to bring consolation to those who are grieving, affirm our faith in Jesus Christ and his victory over sin and death, and express our Christian hope in eternal life. Because the three principal rites together – Vigil, Funeral Liturgy, and Committal – form an integrated sequence of rites, each one should be celebrated with the Christian community as part of the Church’s pastoral care for the bereaved.

*“...and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” ~Rev. 21:4*

# The Three Principal Rites of the Catholic Funeral

from *The Order of Christian Funerals* (1989)

## I. Vigil for the Deceased

The Vigil for the Deceased is the official prayer of the Church for the deceased and the first of three major rites celebrated by the Christian community. The Vigil should be celebrated between the time of death and the funeral liturgy, ordinarily on the day before or evening before the funeral Mass. It is recommended that the Vigil take place as soon as possible after death. The Vigil may take place in the home of the deceased, at the funeral home, or in the church. The Vigil is a Liturgy of the Word and centers on readings from Sacred Scripture, songs, psalms, and intercessory prayer.



A brief homily may be given by the priest or deacon. The Vigil is the preferred time for family and friends to share stories, reflections, and eulogies on the life of the deceased. Devotional prayers, such as the Rosary, may not replace the Vigil, but may take place before or after the Vigil. Because of its importance, the Vigil should not be omitted.

## II. Funeral Liturgy

The Funeral Liturgy is the central liturgical celebration for the deceased. It is usually [within] a Funeral Mass although, if a large number of those attending are not Catholic, the Funeral Liturgy may take place outside of Mass. In the Funeral Liturgy the Church affirms in sign and symbol, word and gesture that through baptism, we share in Christ's death and resurrection, and look forward to the day when we will be raised up and united in God's kingdom of light and peace. The Funeral Mass is normally celebrated on the day of burial and should take place in the parish church of the deceased.

A priest is the presider for a Funeral Mass; however, if a priest is not available, a deacon or a lay minister commissioned by the pastor can preside at a Funeral Liturgy outside of Mass. The Funeral Liturgy begins by sprinkling the casket/urn with holy water to remind us that in baptism the deceased has died with Christ and risen with him to new life. The pall is then placed over the casket to remind us of the white garment the deceased received at baptism. The casket is placed in front of the altar near the paschal candle to remind us of Christ's victory over sin and death. When the casket is in place, other Christian symbols, such as the Book of the Gospels, a Bible, or a cross may be placed on it.

The Funeral Liturgy continues as the community celebrates the Liturgy of the Word. If a priest or deacon presides, the homily is based on the readings and focuses on the paschal mystery and God's promises. The assembly prays for the deceased and the bereaved in the intercessions. In a Funeral Mass, the Liturgy of the Eucharist is celebrated as usual. In word and sacrament we celebrate Christ's death and resurrection and reaffirm our share in this mystery.

The final commendation immediately concludes the Funeral Liturgy.

At this time the deceased is entrusted to God's mercy.

**“In the Funeral Liturgy the Church affirms in sign and symbol, word and gesture that through baptism, we share in Christ's death and resurrection...”**

While an extended time of remembrance is more appropriate at the Vigil, a family member or friend may speak briefly in remembrance of the deceased just prior to the final commendation, if desired. These words should speak primarily of the deceased's faith and give witness to our Christian hope. It is best to review the prepared remarks with the presider in advance. The body of the deceased is incensed during the song of farewell and the prayer of commendation concludes the rite. The procession is formed and the casket is carried to the place of burial.

### **III. Committal**

The funeral rites conclude with the Committal at the burial or entombment of the deceased. It takes place as soon as possible after the Funeral Liturgy. The rite of Committal takes place beside the open grave or place of interment. Though brief, the Committal rite assists the bereaved at this most difficult time. This rite includes a short verse from Scripture, the prayer of committal, intercessions, the Lord's Prayer, and a final blessing. A song affirming hope in the resurrection may conclude this rite and those who wish may offer some gesture of farewell.



## **Related Optional Rites**

Though secondary, these rites are helpful in accompanying the mourners at times of transition and through the various stages of facing the reality of death.

### **Prayers After Death**

This rite is a model prayer, which may be used in whole, in part, or adapted for particular circumstances. It consists of a brief reading from Scripture, the Lord's Prayer, and some suggestions for a concluding prayer. This rite may be used when the pastoral minister first meets with the family following the death.

### **Gathering in the Presence of the Body**

As the family gathers in the presence of the body for the first time or prior to cremation, the pastoral minister is present to offer prayer and support. This rite consists of a short passage from Scripture, a psalm, sprinkling with holy water, and the Lord's Prayer.

### **Transfer of the Body to the Church or to the Place of Committal**

This rite supports the family and friends as they prepare to take the body to the church or place of committal. It may also be used when receiving the body at the door of the church preceding a period of visitation if the Funeral Liturgy is not to take place immediately. This rite consists of a brief Scripture verse, a litany, the Lord's Prayer and a concluding prayer led by the pastoral minister.

# Cremation

The Catholic Church strongly encourages the burial of the body of the deceased, but it permits cremation unless it is evident that cremation was chosen for anti-Christian motives. The cremated remains of the deceased are due the same respect as the full body of the deceased, and they must be placed in a worthy vessel and buried in a cemetery, entombed in a columbarium or buried at sea (in the urn). Cremated remains may never be scattered. When cremation is chosen one of the following options is used.

## Cremation after the Funeral Liturgy

Even when cremation is chosen, the Church recommends that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites. The presence of the body helps to more clearly express the dignity of the human body which the Church affirms in the liturgy.

## Funeral Liturgy in the Presence of the Cremated Remains

The Holy See authorized the bishops of the United States to allow the celebration of a Funeral Liturgy in the presence of the cremated remains of the body. The cremated remains of the deceased are to be treated with the same respect given to the full body. Prior to the Funeral Liturgy, the urn containing the cremated remains is placed on a suitable stand or table in the place normally occupied by the casket. The Funeral Liturgy begins with the sprinkling of holy water. The Funeral Liturgy is celebrated as usual. At the end of the Funeral Liturgy the final commendation takes place. The text for the Sprinkling rite, Dismissal, and Committal are adapted using the approved texts for cremated remains.

## Cremation and Committal Prior to the Funeral Liturgy

When the body is cremated and/or buried soon after death, the rites of final commendation and Committal are used at the appropriate times, even though occurring prior to the Funeral Liturgy. The Vigil and other rites are also adapted, as necessary. The Funeral Liturgy may be celebrated, but the sprinkling rite and final commendation are omitted and the Liturgy concludes with the blessing and dismissal of the assembly.

# Civic and Military Honors

Only Christian symbols may be placed near the casket or urn during the funeral liturgy. Any other symbols, for example, national flags, or flags or insignia of associations, have no place in the Funeral Liturgy (Order of Christian Funerals, #38). Because of the coherent structure of our Catholic funeral rites, it is recommended that military honors take place at the conclusion of the Committal Rite.

# Music

Music for the funeral rites should be chosen in consultation with the parish liturgy coordinator and should be suitable for Catholic worship as outlined in the U.S. Bishop's document, Sing To The Lord (#246-248).

# Minister of the Funeral Rites

Priests, as teachers of faith and ministers of comfort, preside at the funeral rites, especially the Mass. When no priest is available, deacons, as ministers of the Word, of the altar, and of charity, preside at funeral rites. When no priest or deacon is available for the vigil and related rites or the rite of committal, a lay minister commissioned by the pastor presides. (Order of Christian Funerals, #14)

### For more general information:

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