

A Catholic Funeral

Imprimi Potest:

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Imprimatur:

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ISBN 978-0-7648-1291-0

Published by Liguori Publications. Liguori, Missouri 63057

To order, visit Liguori.org or call 1-800-325-9521

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Cover design and photograph: Jodi Hendrickson

Interior photographs—

Gene Plaisted: OSC: 6, 10, 13, 19, 24, 26, 38, 47

IndexOpen: 4, 14, 17, 21, 29, 32, 35, 50

Printed in the United States of America

26 25 24 23 22 / 6 5 4 3 2

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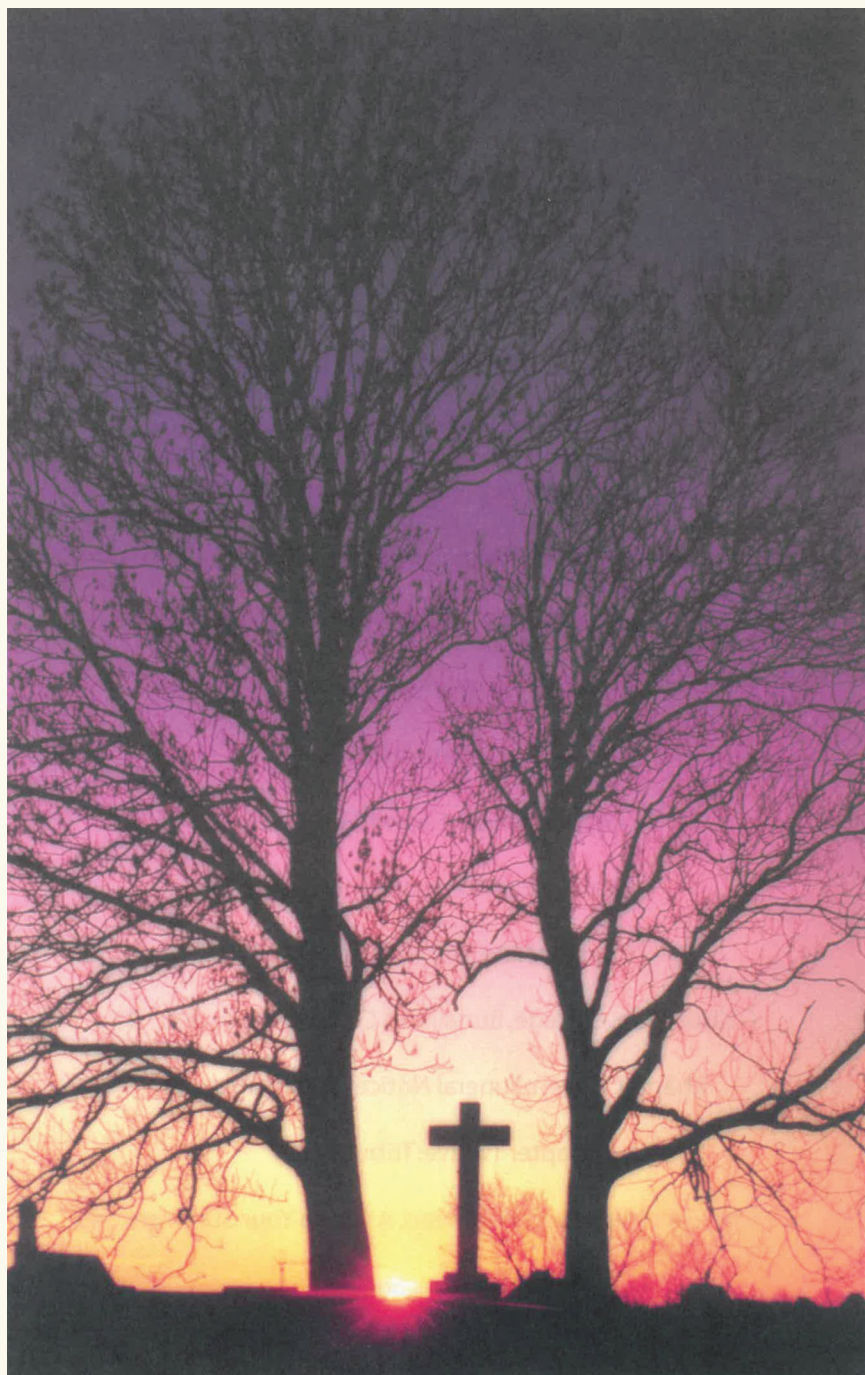
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Introduction

Why a Catholic Funeral Mass and Burial?

The Catholic funeral ritual is one of the Church's greatest gifts. It celebrates the belief in resurrection and forgiveness.

The Church opens its doors wide to deceased Catholics—saints and sinners of every stripe—for funeral Masses and memorial Masses. Like the Prodigal Son, Catholics who have been estranged from the Church are as welcome as Catholics who attended daily Mass.

This booklet is intended to help you and those close to you plan the funeral rites of someone for whom you care deeply.

You may be reading it on some of the darkest days in your life just before or just after the death of a loved one. It is a sacred time for survivors and a time for family and friends to put away old hurts and come together again. Taking the necessary time to plan, making the practical decisions focused on faith and hope will help the grieving transcend the pain and begin to answer the question: "Why, Lord?"

Remembering the Individual

Catholicism's ancient, Scripture-based rite can help heal hearts searching for meaning. The prayers and readings of a funeral Mass and a funeral vigil can be tailored to the life of the deceased. A Catholic funeral need not be one size fits all. God's grace is always particular.

Family, friends, a pastor, or other celebrants can give loving attention to the choices of readings, hymns, and prayer petitions so that they echo the faith and memory of the deceased person. Every Christian funeral shares

the belief that God prevails over death. While popular American culture claims funerals are only for the living and not for the dead, this is not true for Catholics. Catholic funeral rites are most certainly for the dead.

If you only have a few hours to prepare for the funeral Mass, go to a room, close the door, and delegate others to answer the doorbell and phones while you read. Keep this booklet handy over the next few days and encourage family members and volunteers to read other chapters after basic decisions are made.

The final chapter of this booklet deals with pre-need planning. That chapter is followed by a series of worksheets that will help those planning an immediate funeral as well as a funeral at a future date. Pre-planning can be a gift to your loved ones. Use this booklet to begin that process.



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shares the belief that
God prevails over death.*

Chapter One

Immediate Concerns

Families should remember that there is always time for prayer after death. Try not to let others rush your decisions. Most hospitals will respect your wishes and leave you alone with the body for a time. Undertakers who pick up the body from a home also will respect your wishes. Gathering around the body and saying prayers together can be a moment of consolation for the immediate family.

Pre-planned Funeral Instructions

First check to see if the deceased left instructions to help with funeral planning. A family member should find the deceased's important papers, often stored with his or her will in a home safe or a safety deposit box. Check with the family lawyer. The papers may include prepaid deeds for a cemetery plot, or a prepaid contract with an undertaking establishment, a receipt for a prepaid casket along with other instructions the deceased may have left.

First Phone Calls

If death is imminent, make plans with whomever is at the bedside at home or at the hospital to call one or two others, who will in turn call others. Those phone numbers should be written down on a short list in a small but easy-to-find notebook.

Other calls to be made include close friends and relatives who live in the same town as the deceased. It should be someone with a bit of emotional distance who knows you and your preferences well. They need to be kind as well as efficient. They need not know the deceased well. They need to be

people you are not afraid of asking to do many simple but necessary tasks you will not have time to do.

Many parishes, especially in newer suburbs and retirement communities, where families may not have deep roots, have bereavement committees. These groups will send an experienced parish volunteer to help you, if you request it.

Friends can pick up visiting family members at the airport, find guest rooms for them, and find people to attend and watch visiting young children. Others can run errands, take funeral clothing to a cleaners, sew on buttons, straighten up the home of the main survivor, and organize an informal meal after the burial.

More Calls

A family member should telephone a couple of family members with the news of the death. Those two relatives should form a family phone tree so family members can have the comfort of hearing about the death from a family member.

Others, your close friends, for example, may telephone the same relatives hours later, after the times of vigil service, wake, and funeral are set. Many close relatives may feel hurt if a stranger calls them to announce the initial news.

If the deceased was divorced or has former children-in-law who are now alienated from the family through divorce, find the most tactful, compassionate family member or friend to telephone that divorced person.

Strangers may make the calls announcing the death to anyone beyond the family members and very close friends who are "like family." Most close friends are just grateful not to read it first in the newspaper funeral notice.

Many of the day-of-the-death details should be done by friends, so the immediate family can find time to be together for a few hours in peaceful, prayerful reflection. Coping with grief and finding time for rest may be all some family members will be able to do during these stressful days and nights. Close friends need to pay attention to survivors who may experience health problems due to the stress of the death and funeral of a loved one. It is a good idea that the survivors have plenty of water and healthy food around at this time.

Legal Issues

If the person dies at home, a doctor, medical office, or the county coroner's office must attest to the death. A doctor who cared for a sick person can easily do this, as can any professional working for a hospice program. Depending on state law, a sudden death may require more official involvement, and the body may have to go to the medical examiner's office before being taken to a funeral home.

A human-inflicted death requires a call to the police and an examination of the body by the county coroner. A pastor, doctor, or a funeral home can advise you about applicable state laws.

Caution

Faithful Catholics, including those who were daily communicants, have been buried from mortuaries with no funeral Mass, because they called a mortuary before calling the parish and were told that a funeral Mass was too much trouble. When the surviving spouse is a non-Catholic, who may not understand the richness of faith found in the Catholic funeral Mass and makes arrangements in a secular setting, the deceased's family often feel left in a vacuum. Often the deceased's siblings or parents are not told about funeral service arrangements until contracts are signed.

See Chapter Four for details about choosing a funeral home.

Contacting the Funeral Home

In this first conversation with the funeral home, get an estimated time when the hearse will arrive to pick up the body if death occurs at home. Also set up a time to meet with them later that day or early the next day after you have met with the parish priest. Stay calm. There is no rush.

Chapter Two

Finding a Priest

For many Catholics, asking a priest to celebrate the funeral is the easy task. A quick phone call shortly after the death to the priest at the nearby parish begins the planning for the funeral. You may have a relative who is a priest and would make the funeral Mass very special. Or, you may call the priest who has been bringing Communion to the deceased in a nursing home or long term care facility.

If there is more than one clergyman who is close to the family, all can concelebrate the Mass. The main celebrant welcomes the body to the church, and another priest can give the homily. Sometimes priests simply hear about the funeral and arrive with vestments in hand to concelebrate.

Survivors may have more difficulty if they live in one town and the deceased lived in another community and the burial is to be in a third place where the deceased spent most of her or his life. Families are scattered across the country.



*Virtually all
parishes will
welcome back
the bodies of
former longtime
parishioners.*