

Questions about Funerals
St. Catherine of Siena Parish
West Dundee, Illinois

“My dwelling, like a shepherd’s tent, is struck down and borne away from me; You have folded up my life, like a weaver who severs the last thread.” Isaiah 38:12

Such anguish in the word of the prophet Isaiah! We can sense the fear and hurt over our earthly existence just...ending. Our rituals for the dead are reminders that our faith promises our existence with God, forever. How do we view funerals today?

Expectations for funerals and memorials are different today than even a decade ago. Our ministry responses also have changed. This leaflet offers snapshots of what you and your family might want to consider.

Is there one source that explains basic Catholic Church structure and theology for funerals? A book called *The Order of Christian Funerals* contains various rites and Masses. It explains the spiritual and practical attitudes we have toward life and death. And this 1989 text explains our respect for human persons, body and soul. The text was appended in 1997 to include teachings and prayers applied for cremation of human remains. The use of each text is mandated for use throughout our country.

Why a funeral Mass?

Baptized Catholics who have maintained their connections with the Church have a right to Catholic services. The community expects to gather to celebrate the resurrection promised to each of us.

Our rite of funerals includes the visitation, the funeral Mass, and the rite of committal or burial. Contrary to popular opinion, dying is about the most public thing we do: family, friends, and neighbors are affected, there are medical records and death certificates, contacting creditors and pensions, probating wills, talking to Social Security, transferring property, and so on.

Can you recommend a funeral director?

It is unethical for churches or clergy to recommend a funeral home. Families often decide based on proximity to their homes or the location of the funeral and burial.

Do we really need to print an obituary and have a wake? Isn’t that just extra expense?

Let’s concentrate on souls and hearts first. Families and friends have a work of Christian love to perform. Planning together can help people grieve. People sometimes have little money or insurance to cover expenses. On the other hand, avoiding traditional gestures might be more expensive in the long run. There is an old expression, ‘grief will not be denied.’ What money a family can save on the

immediate social customs might be spent on the aftermath of unresolved or unexpressed grief. Remember, too, that a wake is to help the grieving of extended family, work friends, church friends, and neighbors. When someone we know just ‘disappears’ it hurts the community – and sometimes discourages others from dealing successfully with tragedies in their own families.

How does a family plan an appropriate funeral? Isn’t that a lot of work?

Funeral directors take care of more than the preparing the remains of our loved ones. Competent directors have a checklist of things – first, they take care of the survivors. Then they address management and communications needs. They will be sure that we have the right paper work, coordinate schedule for flowers, visitations, funerals or prayer services, and they help shape death notices for newspapers and the internet. They may even provide a list of items that families can overlook: contacting banks, care providers, government agencies, home security while house or apartment are unoccupied.

What about cremation? The funeral Mass and all its prayers assume that the body of the deceased person is present. There is a strong religious preference to postpone cremation until after the Mass. Where cremation occurs, a memorial Mass is held with the cremated remains of the person present in the church. This Mass is permitted so long as the cremation is not

meant as a statement against belief in the last things, including final judgment and eternal life.

What is the proper thing to do with the cremated personal remains? Catholics properly inter ashes integrally in a grave or niche at a cemetery. People are surprised at how much they need a place to go for their mourning. Our practices demonstrate Christian faith in awaiting the resurrection. For this reason among others, church law does not okay scattering or parceling (for example, making jewelry or giving each relative a thimble full) of the ashes of the body of the deceased.

With cremation, can we schedule a funeral-memorial when we want it? This is a brand new wrinkle in church life. Everybody wants a more convenient time, a Saturday, or when relatives are here for the holidays or a reunion. You can understand why we should not schedule weeks or months in advance because we should be able to mourn and bury those who die within a given week. St. Catherine has its share of 3, 4, or 5 funerals in a single week.

Rituals are to help people begin an important step in mourning. Experience has shown that families who wait months or years to commit urns to cemeteries or columbariums (above ground niche structures) discover their grief returns as fresh as the week their loved one died.

What if we want some happy time, some celebration and story telling? Can we get this with a Catholic funeral? Remember that the Catholic funeral ritual has three parts: the visitation (also called the wake), Holy Mass, and burial. Many families host a lunch after the committal. Visiting, story telling and eulogies are welcomed at wakes and lunches.

If the priest or deacon knows the deceased, some personal notes might be included in the homily. We don't do eulogies at Mass because these concentrate on the person who died rather than their resurrection through Christ.

Is it true that a person can have a funeral only if they gave a lot of money to the Church during their life? No. No one checks financial records as a qualification for Catholic wakes or funerals. Baptized, practicing Catholics have a right to the funeral Mass, and pastors have an obligation to provide it. Most Catholic parishes request a "stole fee" donation, and that goes directly to the parish, not the priest. This donation itself does not cover the actual cost of what the parish provides.

Can Catholics who have divorced and remarried outside the Church be buried with a Catholic ceremony? Yes, these facts in themselves do not exclude the possibility of Catholic burial. In individual cases, the diocesan chancery may have to be consulted.

Can a person who committed suicide have a Catholic funeral and burial? Generally yes. We do not condone suicide. Nor can we assume that an individual is 'out of their mind' when s/he has taken his life – that is usually for others to sort out. Charitable and pastoral practice comes to the aid of families at this time. Depending on circumstances, the facts of a death may or may not be mentioned based on legal and family needs.

If you have further questions, visit some websites like the Archdiocese of Milwaukee on funerals at <http://www.archmil.org/resources/ShowResource.asp?ID=788>
Or phone a local Catholic deacon or priest.

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