

TO PRAY FOR THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

A Pastoral Letter on Christian Funerals

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

No one leaves this world alive. All of us face death - our own death and those of our friends and loved ones. Death is natural and part of the human condition after the fall of Adam. Saint Cyprian, a third century Bishop of North Africa and a martyr, questioned the logic of Christians who pray daily for the kingdom to come and God's will to be done, but try to avoid death and deny its reality: "How unreasonable to pray that God's will be done, but not promptly obey it when he calls us from this world." Saint Cyprian was writing to encourage Christians facing martyrdom.

Today, we have different reasons to avoid facing death when it comes to our friends and relatives. One reason is the transfer of the care of the sick and dying to the hospital and nursing home away from our own homes. Care is taken from our hands. Our loved ones enter a living situation with rules and regulations that we do not always understand. While some families are able to care for loved ones, many of us cannot and so find ourselves with only minimal tasks of care giving. In this circumstance, we begin to accept death and to experience a form of closure when our mother, father, spouse, or other loved one is institutionalized. Consequently, we may consider the funeral rites unnecessary for assisting us in handling the loss resulting from death.

There is another circumstance in which many young adults find themselves. If they have never faced the loss of a close family member, death is strange and a mystery to them. In addition, if they no longer practice the faith, they may be unfamiliar with the Catholic burial rites. As a result, they are inclined to avoid the unknown and eliminate or minimize the ritual acts when they have the responsibility for burying the dead.

For these and other reasons, we see a trend today to omit or reduce to a minimum the Church's rites of Christian burial. This diminishes prayer for the dead and removes the opportunity to give witness to faith. It deprives those remaining of the consolation and emotional relief that the funeral rites offer. Grief is necessary and should be allowed to run its natural course. We are then better able to regain our balance and continue to live our lives in a healthy manner. The grieving process is assisted by the support of others in the family and the community of faith. The parish family stands willing to help us heal and find peace. With this Pastoral Letter, I want to encourage our people, pastors and other pastoral ministers and funeral directors to make full use of the richness of the traditional Catholic funeral and burial rites—for the sake of our beloved dead and for the sake of those who mourn their loss.

THE FUNERAL RITES

There are three principal moments in the Christian funeral: the Vigil or Wake, the Funeral Liturgy, and the Rite of Committal. For the proper celebration of a Christian Burial and the fuller participation of the family, it is best that the pastor or associate meet with the bereaved soon after the death. Visiting with and listening to the bereaved are key elements for effective planning. In this way the pastor can meet the needs and wishes of the family and fulfill his own responsibilities to provide the Church's ministry to them. The funeral director can often help the family to understand the role of the Church's minister at the time of death. The minister's involvement is essential and should be expected and sought by the family members.

Many of our parishes offer the family the services of a parish Bereavement Committee. Its members are trained to accompany the family in observing the passage of their loved one. They can assist in the planning of the liturgy helping the bereaved to select readings, prayers, music, and members of the parish community to serve as ushers, pallbearers, lectors, and servers. Parish lectors exercise the responsibility of proclaiming scripture and can free the family members to experience the Church's ministry to them. Bereavement ministry is a true Christian ministry that can alleviate much of the family's anxiety and questions.

THE VIGIL

It is not uncommon today that more people attend the wake than the Funeral Liturgy. The Church's Ritual uses the word vigil for a reason. It is a time when the faithful watch in prayer with the family members and await the Funeral Liturgy and burial. The Christian community gathers at the family home, the Funeral Home, or the church. The Church gently accompanies the grieving family and offers encouragement and hope as they face the death of a loved one and ponder the passage from this life to the life which is to come.

The Vigil can be thought of as a dialogue between God and the assembled people and between the consoling community and the bereaved. The focal points to consider when planning the Vigil are the deceased and the bereaved. How can the deceased be honored and lifted up in prayer? How can the bereaved be consoled? What readings, what songs, what stories, what prayers will give the service its most rewarding dimension and content? We have discovered that story telling helps people to adjust to the new circumstances that accompany a major loss. With the special time afforded for the sharing of stories and memories from the life of the deceased, the Vigil can be a good beginning for the long process of coming to terms with life now that the deceased person is gone.

Many pastors and families see an advantage in holding the Vigil service at the parish. A gathering in the church, while showing due respect to the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, allows more of the community to participate in the offering of sympathy, but also in the Funeral Mass that might follow. When this happens, there should be some amount of time separating the Vigil from the Funeral Mass or Liturgy to avoid duplication of prayers and scripture.

rites related to the vigil

The Church offers the family other opportunities for ritual prayer, two before the Vigil, and one after. The first of these Related Rites offers prayers soon after the death has occurred, the second when the family gathers for the first time in the presence of the body, and the third as the body begins the journey to the church for the Funeral Mass or Liturgy. These three brief times of prayer are signs of the community's concern for the family members and close friends of the deceased. The Word of God is proclaimed and familiar prayers and litanies are prayed—simple rituals at critical moments which go a long way to help reassure the mourners and create an atmosphere of calm in the face of need and uncertainty.

THE FUNERAL LITURGY

The Funeral Liturgy is the central celebration of the Funeral Rites. The Eucharist is the foretaste of eternal life in Christ. In Holy Mass we are united with Christ, with each other and with all the faithful living and dead. Jesus said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood shall live forever." (John 6:54) Here in the Holy Mass we make present Christ's saving death and Resurrection and we remember His passing from death to life. Our reception of the body of the deceased in the Church and the celebration of the Eucharist with the body present has significant meaning for the believer. It was in the Church where the Christian life of the deceased person was begotten in baptism and nourished in the Eucharist. Here he or she has encountered Christ in the other sacraments of the Church. Now the community of faith gathers in the church to commend one of its members to God. The people of God reverence the body with prayer, incense, and Holy Water, for we believe it has been the temple of the Holy Spirit and the dwelling place of the Holy Trinity. Here we clothe the casket with the pall to remind us of the garment given in baptism, signifying life in Christ.

The full and active participation of the assembly shows the importance of prayers for the dead and strengthens and supports the bereaved. Through the funeral rites and presence of the assembled faithful, the family receives a sure sign of faith and hope in the death and Resurrection of the Lord - the Paschal Mystery. At the same time, members of the parish community address their need to grieve the loss of one of their own by participating in the Funeral Mass and show their respect and love for the deceased by their attendance.

There is no more effective means to express our love and provide spiritual benefit to the deceased than to offer Holy Mass that they may be released from their sins and gain eternal life. "From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1032) Participation of the assembly in the Funeral Liturgy does not merely fulfill a social requirement, but also constitutes a spiritual and corporal work of mercy. It is our Christian duty to pray for and bury the dead.

It is sad, but sometimes happens today that the family of an elderly person with few surviving relatives and friends decides to forgo the Funeral Mass. This is unfortunate, because regardless of the number of participants, the Mass remains the efficacious prayer of the whole Church on behalf of the one who has died. Through the Funeral Mass, the Church offers the infinite merits of her savior, Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of the sins of the deceased and brings to reverent burial a member of the parish and of the body of Christ.

The Church's Ritual calls for a homily at the Funeral Mass or Liturgy based on the scripture readings rather than a eulogy. (*Order of Christian Funerals #27*) The celebrant should speak of God's compassionate love and the Lord's promise of resurrection assured by the paschal mystery of his death, resurrection and ascension. The homilist may illustrate how these mysteries were present in the deceased's life in Christ. The assembly thereby can receive consolation and strength to face death with faith and hope. Eulogies inevitably and understandably extol the virtues of the deceased and can easily portray a false picture of reality within the Funeral Liturgy. In truth, we are sinners and are saved not by our good deeds, but by the redemptive merits of Jesus Christ, our Divine Savior.

The Order of Christian Funerals offers an option for a family member or friend to speak briefly in remembrance of the deceased after Communion and before the Final Commendation that concludes the Funeral Liturgy. To ensure these words, poems, or inspirational readings complement the dignity of the celebration and are appropriate to the liturgical action, the remarks should be limited to a few minutes in length and should be written and shared in advance with the celebrant.

RITE OF COMMITTAL

The Church's prayer at the graveside helps bring some closure to the loss of a loved one. Out of respect for the deceased, we commit the body to the earth from which it came with the sure and certain hope that the dead will rise again and we shall be reunited with them in heaven. Ideally, the committal rite in the cemetery immediately follows the Funeral Liturgy and is led by the presider of the Funeral Mass or Liturgy. A sense of peace comes with seeing our loved ones reverently laid to rest and knowing where the remains are buried or entombed. In the Upper Peninsula the winter weather often delays the burial until Springtime. In this case, funeral directors should arrange the time of committal so that some family members can be present if possible. The committal prayers of the Church should always be prayed. In the absence of a priest, a deacon or trained lay person can offer these prayers.

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

WHEN MASS IS NOT CELEBRATED

There are some days when a Funeral Mass cannot be celebrated. The liturgical law prohibits a Funeral Mass, for example, during the Triduum of Holy Week. Also our Diocese prohibits a Funeral Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. In addition,

the shortage of priests at this time may increase instances when priests are not available for funerals.

The role of presider at a Funeral Liturgy outside of Mass is reserved to a priest or a deacon. However, a deacon or trained lay person may celebrate the Vigil and Committal Rites when a priest cannot be present. If a Funeral Mass cannot be celebrated, a Memorial Mass should be scheduled at a later time convenient for family and friends.

BURIAL OF THOSE NOT CATHOLIC OR OF NON-PRACTICING CATHOLICS

In the event that his or her own minister is not available, a baptized Christian may be given the Church's funeral rites if requested by the deceased or the family. In a related circumstance, if the deceased has not been a practicing Catholic or if his or her family members are not Catholic or not practicing the Catholic Faith, the parish priest should judge, after consulting with the family, whether a Funeral Liturgy without Mass is more appropriate. Finally, funeral rites are to be celebrated for catechumens, for they have been signed with the cross of Christ and have expressed their desire to be baptized members of the Catholic Church.

BURIAL AND CREMATION

The Church prefers that the body of the deceased be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum, for this gives a fuller expression of our Catholic Faith. As Christ was in the tomb and passed from death to eternal life, so we who die in Christ will follow Him on the day of resurrection. Furthermore, we believe that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Our bodies participate in the saving work of Christ in living the Christian life. I have been assured that conscientious funeral directors are willing to work with a bereaved family, so that a dignified funeral service with burial or entombment of the body can be offered within everyone's financial means.

Cremation has been an acceptable alternative to ground burial or entombment for Catholics since 1963. In the past, cremation was considered an expression of denial of the resurrection of the body. Today, for reasons of economy and transportation of the remains over long distances to the place of final disposition, some choose cremation. When the family chooses cremation, the Church prefers that it follow the Funeral Liturgy, so that the body can be present in the church. This enables the family and friends to give proper respect to the body before cremation and assists them in the grieving process. However, *The Order of Christian Funerals* makes allowances for the cremated remains to be present at the Funeral Liturgy, provided they are placed in a worthy vessel. The burial or inurnment in a cemetery, mausoleum, or columbarium should occur as soon as possible after the Funeral Mass, so that the ashes are not kept in the funeral home or family home. Out of respect for the body, the Church does not permit the remains to be scattered over water or some favorite spot.

CONCLUSION

Saint Cyprian offers us more thoughts that fittingly conclude this Pastoral Letter. They are pertinent to our times when many people are more and more confused about the spiritual meaning of death and the importance of living each day in light of the eternity to which we are destined. He writes:

"Be single minded, firm in faith, and steadfast in courage, ready for God's will, whatever it may be. Banish the fear of death and think of the eternal life that follows it. That will show people that we really live our faith. We ought never to forget, beloved, that we have renounced the world. We are living here now as aliens and only for a time. When the day for our homecoming puts an end to our exile, frees us from the bonds of the world, and restores us to paradise and to a kingdom, we should welcome it."

Not unlike the third century of Saint Cyprian, our 21st century requires us Christians to dare to be different and to live lives that stand in contrast to many values of the world. Central to our faith is the Resurrection. We do well to discern our choices before important decisions with the question Saint Ignatius Loyola used: "What good is this for eternity?" This is especially relevant to our way of observing the passage of our beloved dead from this world to the life that is to come. The Church's burial rites express our faith in the Resurrection. They enable us to fulfill the Lord's commandment to love our neighbor by praying for the living and the dead, and they deepen our hope for eternal life.

Finally, my dear friends in Christ, I offer you the words of this Pastoral Letter with the same intention Saint Paul expressed in his letter to the Thessalonians:

"We would have you be clear about those who sleep in death, brothers; otherwise you might yield to grief, like those who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, God will bring forth with him from the dead those also who have fallen asleep believing in him...Thenceforth we shall be with the Lord unceasingly. Console one another with this message." (1 Thess. 4:13-14,17)

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