

AFTER THE BURIAL

One meaningful way to perpetuate prayers for those who have passed on is through the celebration of Masses on their behalf. There is a long-standing Christian custom of having Masses offered for the deceased on special anniversaries, particularly on the anniversary of one's passing.

You can arrange for Masses to be said for a loved one through your parish or with a religious community. Several communities make available Mass novenas, which consist of a series of nine Masses.

Some communities, such as the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC, preserve the custom of offering Gregorian Masses. Gregorian Masses consist of a series of thirty Masses said for the deceased on consecutive days in order to obtain deliverance of the person's soul from purgatory through the benevolent dispensation of God's mercy. The custom originates from a private revelation received by Pope St. Gregory the Great, who himself began the practice by offering the Masses on behalf of a deceased monk.

Indulgences may also be obtained by the living on behalf of the deceased through the completion of the designated prayers and works.

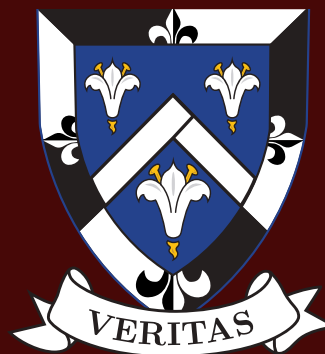
Finally, in addition to your prayers, the giving of alms in honor of the deceased through the direction of donations toward a worthy end follows a time-honored, scripturally-based tradition. In the account of the Jewish soldiers in 2 Maccabees mentioned above, scripture records that the general took up a collection among the soldiers which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for a sacrifice on behalf of the fallen (2 Macc 12:43). Gifts made in the name of the deceased can be a fitting way of preserving one's memory through the support of religiously-inspired works.

The most lasting support that we can provide to our friends and families consists of that which will aid their progress to heaven. Our prayers for their prompt passage to a heavenly homeland following their exit from this life are an important way to offer that most valuable assistance. The funeral liturgy in particular focuses the attention of those left behind on the final destination that we all hope to enjoy in the world to come.

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PLANNING A
CATHOLIC FUNERAL



The Church is a spiritual home that spans heaven and earth. Its household grows in this world and reaches its fulfillment in the next. As we help expand its numbers through our participation in baptism among the living, we assist in retaining the size of the household through our prayers for the dead. The funeral liturgy is an opportunity for us to send our loved ones off to the next world provisioned by our prayers.

WHY PRAY FOR THE DEAD?

It is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead (2 Macc 12:46).

The practice of prayer for the dead has its roots in the Old Testament. For example, the Second Book of Maccabees tells us of a Jewish general who, after battle, led his soldiers in offering prayers and alms on behalf of their fallen brothers-in-arms. Scripture tells us that, in doing so, the general

acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection in mind; for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he did this with a view to the splendid reward that awaits those who have gone to rest in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be absolved from their sin” (2 Macc 12:43-46).

Catholics today preserve the practice of offering prayers and sacrifices on behalf of the deceased in the hope of their resurrection. In light of Christ’s passion, we have the opportunity to unite the passing of a loved one with Christ’s own suffering and death in the Mass.

As we place the soul of our loved one among the “dead in Christ” (1 Thess 4:16), it is worth bearing in mind that we do so not only for the benefit of the deceased. We too, benefit by our prayers for the dead. The Dominican

saint, Thomas Aquinas, taught that the burial rites are for the sake of both the living and the deceased. Those same prayers that we offer for the advantage of the deceased, profit us as well through bettering our souls for heaven by confirming our belief in the resurrection.

WHAT ARE SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PLANNING A CATHOLIC FUNERAL LITURGY?

The Catholic Funeral Rite is divided into three parts, each of which is probably familiar to you. The discussion below focuses on some liturgical considerations that should be taken into account when planning a Catholic funeral.

VIGIL SERVICE (WAKE)

The vigil, or wake, is an opportunity for family and friends to gather together in honor of the deceased. In addition to providing a source of consolation for those left behind, the vigil is a time to ‘keep watch’ with the remains of the deceased in prayer. Typically, a vigil will conclude with a short liturgy appropriate for the setting. The Order of Christian Funerals provides several options. These prayers may also take the form of one of the hours of the Office of the Dead from the Liturgy of the Hours. A priest, deacon or funeral director can assist you in finding the appropriate prayers and designating a fitting time for them to begin.

FUNERAL MASS

Planning for a funeral Mass involves several considerations. These include:

- **READINGS:** The Liturgy of the Word for a funeral Mass generally consists of a first reading taken from the Old Testament, a responsory psalm that may be recited or sung, a second reading from the New Testament epistles, and a Gospel passage. The Order of Christian Funerals presents options for each. A priest, deacon or other member of the parish staff can discuss these options with you.
- **PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL:** You may wish to consult with the priest, deacon or other member of the parish staff concerning any special requests you might have concerning the prayers of the faithful that are offered after the homily.
- **MUSIC:** The music at a funeral Mass should be dignified and reverent, and appropriate for the solemn character of the Church’s liturgy. You may also wish to have the music echo one or more themes reflected in the readings selected for the liturgy. A typical funeral Mass includes three hymns plus a song of farewell, or a Mass setting of sacred music (chants or polyphony). Many parishes make available lists of music that identify possible selections.

- **PARTICIPANTS IN THE FUNERAL LITURGY:** It is natural to want to include family and friends in the liturgy. Typically, there is a need for pallbearers (usually six to eight), lectors, gift-bearers to present the bread and wine at the offertory, etc. A priest, deacon or other member of the parish staff can discuss with you participation in these roles.

RITE OF COMMITMENT (BURIAL)

The Rite of Committal normally takes place at the gravesite or other location near the final resting place of the deceased’s remains. Here, the living part with the remains of their loved one while the priest or deacon leads the faithful in designated prayers. In light of the intimacy of the moment, some families decide to limit attendance at the burial service. Please inform the funeral director and the priest or deacon if you wish for the burial service to be private.

In most instances, it will be helpful to designate one person to serve as a principal liaison with the parish in planning the funeral liturgy.

CAN I HAVE THE REMAINS OF MY LOVED ONE CREMATED?

The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the deceased be observed; nevertheless, the Church does not prohibit cremation unless it was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine. (Code of Canon Law 1176 §3)

In short, while expressing a preference for the traditional burial custom, the Church allows cremation. There are, however, a few things worth keeping in mind in the event cremation is pursued.

First, the Church expects that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites and, therefore, that cremation be postponed until after the funeral Mass. The reason for this is that the presence of the human body better expresses the Church’s belief in the resurrection of the body at the end of time. Second, the Church asks that the cremains of your loved one be buried or placed in a columbarium. They should not be scattered or retained.

The Church’s practice is designed to keep the remains of a loved one from becoming some sort of decoration or mere memento. Even the most treasured family heirlooms can be lost, mistreated, or damaged as they are handed on through the generations. Burial is the best way to prevent an undignified treatment of the remains of your loved one as we await the resurrection.