

When a Loved One Dies....What do we do?

What happens when a loved one dies?

When someone you love dies, you, as a family member, close friend, or partner, make the funeral arrangements. If you have never done anything like this before, you will have many questions and many things to consider. It is also often a time of raw emotions-grief, sorrow, confusion, loneliness-and even conflict. But you don't have to feel overwhelmed. The parish priest and the funeral director are very experienced and can offer valuable assistance at what is usually a difficult time. Working closely can make this time a little easier. Share with them the information you have and let them help you.

How good a Catholic do you have to be?

Each of us lives our Catholic faith in our own way. Some of us are very involved in the life of the Church; others, for whatever reason, are more distanced. You may live your faith very differently than the person who has died. If you stand a certain distance from the Church, but the person who has died did not, this will not interfere with preparing a Catholic funeral. Perhaps the opposite is true: you are involved, but the person who has died was more distant. In these situations, too, the Catholic tradition offers resources.



What happens between the time of death and the time of the funeral?

That depends on your cultural traditions and on local circumstances. In some places, for example, family and friends gather either at someone's home or at the funeral home to celebrate a wake, which is an extended period of remembering, storytelling, meal-sharing and prayer that may last a few days. In other places, the gathering is compressed into an evening, or sometimes even less time. The celebration of the Vigil of the Deceased would normally be held at the end of this period, on the night before the funeral.

Why is such a sad time called a "celebration"?

The death of someone we love can be a time of great sorrow, but for Christians, death is not the end. When we talk of celebrating a funeral, we are talking about our celebration of the mystery of Jesus' resurrection and the celebration of our 'Christian hope'. A funeral is really an Easter celebration. That is why the priest wears white Easter garments and why the Easter candle is so prominently displayed.

Is a Catholic funeral just a Mass?

The Catholic funeral rite is called the Order of Christian Funerals. With it, the Church accompanies you, and the person you love who has died, from the time of death to the time their body or their cremated remains are buried.

These rites form a progression in order to help you, family, and friends, during this time of separation and letting go of a loved one. The Order is made up of three main celebrations. The principal celebration is, of course, the funeral Mass. The first of the other two is called the Vigil for the Deceased. This vigil is a prayer service that usually takes place in the funeral home during one of the visitation periods, usually the night before the funeral. The second is the Rite of Committal, which consists of prayers said at the cemetery, usually beside the grave or place of interment.

If you ask, prayers may be said when you and your family come to view the body of the deceased for the first time. Prayers may also be said as the procession leaves the funeral home for the church. These prayers are all part of the Order of Christian Funerals.

Each celebration includes scripture, prayers and if possible, hymns. Family members are invited to participate in preparing all these liturgies. You are also invited to take active roles in the liturgies, or to ask others to take part.

"Rites" seem so impersonal. Can we make them more personal?

Yes you can. Each of these celebrations includes a number of different options from which you and the priest or pastoral minister may choose.

People sometimes forget that funeral rites are a community affair too, important to the whole community because they declare, in words, gesture, and symbols, our faith in Jesus' resurrection.

Today, when parishes are large, pastors sometimes don't know the person who has died. This means the pastor and other pastoral ministers will rely on you to tell them who this person was. You should provide not just factual information, but also help the ministers get to know the person you knew and love so well: what they valued, who and what was important to them, how they lived their lives and, most importantly, what their Christian faith meant to them. The better the ministers know the person who died, the more easily they can help you select readings and hymns that reflect that person's life and faith. Plan to take time to sit down with the parish priest or a member of the pastoral staff to discuss the details of the rites. Share information freely and discuss any special wishes you may have. In addition to meeting with the parish priest, you may also be invited to meet with music ministers to discuss music selections.

What about music?

Music is one of the most important aspects of a funeral liturgy. Music adds a powerful dimension to the liturgy and draws people in ways that words often cannot. People choose music in different ways. Sometimes the selection is completely left to the musicians. Sometimes

the family suggests a particular theme, such as "God is love" or "Trust in God" and the musicians pick music accordingly.

Some people insist on having "Amazing Grace"; others say, "Anything but 'Amazing Grace'." Some people have a list of favorite hymns they would like. Sometimes the family picks up on something that was important to the deceased person, such as water or gardening, and asks the musicians to include hymns that feature water or sing about the life and growth that God gives.

Ask the pastor or parish music ministers to help you make these selections. It is important to remember that parishes have limited resources. The musicians may not know a particular piece and may not have time to learn it. Sometimes a piece, while appropriate, may not be in the hymnal the parish uses. It is important to be flexible around these issues.

What other choices do I need to make?

Although parishes commonly provide music ministers, you will need to select a reader or minister of the word for each of the first and second readings, and for the prayer of the faithful (intercessions). Family members or friends are often invited to take these roles. You might invite family members or friends to place the pall (a white cloth) on the coffin at the beginning of the celebration.

What if the family is not Roman Catholic?

In these circumstances, a Liturgy of the Word, rather than a funeral Mass might be a better choice. Discuss it with the parish priest.

What about a eulogy?

Although the Catholic funeral Mass is an opportunity to remember the person who has died, remember that it is a celebration of the saving mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. That is why a eulogy, which is a speech praising someone who has died, is not part of a Catholic funeral. It is important in the grieving process, however, for people to share memories. There are two other, more appropriate, occasions when personal remembering can take place. At the vigil, you can invite family members, friends, or colleagues to speak about what the deceased meant to them. People can also share personal memories at the reception after the funeral Mass.

What do Catholics think about the body of the deceased?

When Catholics pray the creed, we say out loud, "I believe in the resurrection of the body." For all Christians, the human body has great value. Our bodies (good because they are God's creation), have been our way of living in the world. Jesus, too, lived his human life in a body like ours. "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us," says John in his gospel. In baptism, our bodies are made God's temple. Because of this dignity and importance of the human body, Catholic funeral rites treat the body with great respect. During the funeral Mass, for example, the priest uses incense over

the body, a sign of reverence given to holy things. The placing of the pall over the coffin and the use of the baptismal candle also point to this dignity.

Grieving in the presence of the body helps people deal with loss. Mourners need sufficient time to remember and celebrate the life of the person who has died, and to begin to grow accustomed to the absence of a loved one. Even if the casket is closed, the physical presence of the body helps in the grieving process and as the rites are celebrated, family and friends celebrate the gift of life that has now returned to God. Bringing the body of the deceased to the church reminds us that this is where Christians begin their faith journey in baptism.

What about cremation?

In recent years, more and more people are choosing cremation. Just as the dignity of the body must be respected for burials, so the dignity of the body must be respected for cremations. Scattering the person's ashes on water or on the ground, or keeping the remains in the home of a relative or friend, are not considered properly respectful. Just as a gravesite needs care and respect, so do ashes. Cremated remains should always be treated with the same respect as the body of the deceased would be. They should be buried in a grave or entombed.

The body is normally taken to the crematorium after the funeral Mass. When the cremation has taken place earlier, the cremated remains may be brought to the church as a comfort to the family for a Mass of Remembrance.

What happens at the cemetery?

At the graveside, or at the place of entombment, the Rite of Committal is celebrated. These brief prayers commit the body or the cremated remains to this resting place. The casket will be lowered, or the cremated remains placed in the grave either at this time or later. Much depends on the weather conditions, regulations of the cemetery, and wishes of the family. During this brief celebration, the grave will be blessed if this has not already been done. (In a Catholic cemetery, the grave will already have been consecrated.)

Can I donate my body or my organs to medical science?

Yes. Catholics may arrange to donate their bodies or organs for research or medical studies. A Mass of Remembrance can still be celebrated at the time of death and the Rite of Committal can take place when the remains are disposed.