

Catholic Funeral Rites



The Vigil for the deceased, the Funeral Mass, and the Burial/Committal each have distinct purposes in the journey to healing and wholeness. The Vigil, the Funeral Mass and the Burial/Committal set us on a path to healing, wholeness and peace. We do not have to face it alone, nor should we, our church will be there for us, for that we are truly thankful.

I. Vigil for the Deceased (Wake)

The Vigil for the deceased is the official prayer of the church for the deceased and the first of the three major rites celebrated by the Christian community. The vigil service is never omitted.

When: The vigil is celebrated between the time of death and the funeral liturgy, often on the day before or evening before the funeral Mass.

Where: The vigil may take place in the home of the deceased, at the funeral home, or in the church.

Minister: A priest, deacon, or layperson may preside at this liturgy.

Content: The vigil takes the form of the liturgy of the word. It centers on readings from sacred Scripture, songs, psalms, and intercessory prayer. A brief homily/reflection by the presider is also included. The vigil service is the best time for family and friends to

offer stories, reflections, and eulogies on the life of the deceased, rather than at the funeral Mass. Devotional prayers, such as the rosary, may not replace the vigil service.

II. Funeral Mass

The funeral Mass is the central liturgical celebration for the deceased.

The Christian community reaffirms in sign and symbol, word and gesture that through baptism we share in Christ's death and resurrection, and look forward to the day when we will be raised up and united in the kingdom of light and peace.

When: The funeral Mass is normally celebrated the evening before, or on the day of burial.

Where: The funeral Mass takes place in the parish church.

Minister: A priest is the presider for a funeral Mass.

Content: The funeral Mass begins at the entrance of the church. The priest and the gathered assembly receive the body of the deceased. The coffin is sprinkled with holy water and the pall is placed upon it by family or friends of the deceased to recall the deceased's baptism. The body is carried in procession toward the altar and placed near the paschal candle. When the coffin is in place, other Christian symbols, such as the Book of Gospels or cross may be placed on the coffin.

Mass continues as the community celebrates the Liturgy of the word. The homily is based on the readings and focuses on the paschal mystery and God's love. The assembly prays for the deceased and the bereaved in the intercessions. The Liturgy of the Eucharist is celebrated as usual. In word and sacrament, we celebrate Christ's death and resurrection and reaffirm our share in this mystery.

The final commendation immediately follows the prayer after Communion. At this time the deceased is entrusted to God's tender care. While an extended time of remembrance is most appropriate for the vigil, if desired, one family member or friend may offer a brief prepared eulogy before the final commendation begins. The song of farewell is the climax of the rite of final commendation. This song, sung by the assembly, has a specific function: to affirm hope and trust in the paschal mystery. The body may be incensed during or following the song of farewell. The prayer of commendation concludes the rite.

The procession is formed and the body is carried to the place of burial/committal.

Music for the Funeral Mass: Music selections for funerals are made in conjunction with the ministers of music in the parish and follow the directives of the Roman Catholic Church regarding music in the liturgy. Some requested music selections that do not fall within these norms may be appropriate during the period of the wake.

III. Burial/Committal

The funeral rites conclude with the Rite of Committal.

When: The burial/committal takes place as soon as possible after the funeral Mass.

Where: The Rite of Committal takes place besides an open grave or place of interment. If this is not possible, it may take place at a cemetery chapel.

Minister: A priest, a deacon, or lay person may preside at this service.

Content: Though brief, the Rite of Committal assists the bereaved at this most difficult time. This rite includes a short Scriptural verse, the prayer of committal, intercessions, the Lord's Prayer and a blessing. The lowering of the body into the grave or placement in the tomb or crematorium may take place following the prayer of committal or at the conclusion of the rite. A song affirming hope in the resurrection may conclude this rite. Those who wish may offer some gesture of leave-taking at this time.

Related Optional Rites

Though secondary, these rites are helpful in accompanying the mourners at times of transition and through the various stages of facing the reality of death.

- Prayers after death. This rite is a model of prayer, which may be used in whole, in part, or adapted for particular circumstances. It consists of a brief reading, the Lord's Prayer and some concluding prayers. This rite may be used when the pastoral minister (i.e. priest, deacon, or lay person) first meets with the family following the death.
- Gathering in the presence of the body. As the family gathers in the presence of the body for the first time, the pastoral minister is present to offer prayer and support. This rite consists of a short passage from Scripture, a psalm, sprinkling with holy water, and the Lord's Prayer.
- Transfer of the body to the church or to the place of committal. This rite supports the family and friends as they prepare to take the body to the church or place of committal. It consists of a brief Scripture verse, litany, the Lord's Prayer and a concluding prayer.