

The Funeral Liturgy

These extracts from **A Celebration of Life** provide a helpful introduction to the different elements of the funeral liturgy.

PLANNING YOUR LOVED ONE'S FUNERAL LITURGY

The Church encourages you to be as fully involved as you can in planning your loved one's funeral liturgy. It is the final journey of your loved one. In the liturgy, we celebrate the life of faith of your loved one; we commend him or her to the Lord, we support and pray for all those who mourn, and we seek strength in the promise of the Lord that he will not forget his own. In planning the liturgy, you will need to:

Provide your priest with some biographical information about your deceased loved one that will help him in preparing the funeral homily.

Select the readings for the funeral Mass. Depending on the circumstances; you may decide to have either one or two readings before the gospel reading. You will find a large selection of suitable readings in this booklet. But you are free to choose others. Should you decide to have two readings before the gospel, it is preferable to have a different reader for each.

Select the responsorial psalm, which comes between the first and second readings. You will find a number of responsorial psalms in this booklet, but, again, you are free to choose others. In making your choice, you should take into account the Church's recommendation that, if at all possible, the responsorial psalm or the response to it should be sung.

Choose or compose the general intercessions, which come after the homily. In the general intercessions we pray not only for the deceased and his or her family and friends but also for all the dead and those who mourn them, and for the needs of the wider community. You will find a selection of general intercessions in this booklet. One or more family members should read the general intercessions.

Choose family members or friends of the deceased to bring the gifts of bread and wine to the altar. You should keep in mind, though, that the presentation of the gifts is not the time to carry up personal memorabilia or symbols of the life of the deceased. The best time is at the end of the Mass, during the final commendation and farewell.

Choose the hymns and music for the funeral Mass. The hymns should be selected from those regularly sung during Sunday Mass, and should express our strong belief in the resurrection, which is the basis of Christian hope. They should not include favourite secular songs or music of the deceased not appropriate for a funeral liturgy.

CELEBRATING THE FUNERAL

Your priest will provide you with whatever advice or help you need in planning the liturgy.

The funeral has three principal stages or moments: the vigil and reception of the body at the church; the central funeral liturgy, which normally includes Mass; and the rite of committal. These ritual moments together form your loved one's final journey of farewell. They celebrate our faith in Christ's resurrection and his consoling presence with us at this time.

The wake and vigil for the deceased

There has been a long Irish Catholic tradition of having a wake for the deceased that is often part of NZ rituals as it has links to Maori tradition also. It is a time when the family and friends of the deceased "stay awake" to mourn the passing of the loved one, to share memories of his or her life, to accept the sympathy and support of the Christian community, and to pray that the deceased may have eternal life. The wake normally takes place in the home of the deceased or in the Church. There are a number of prayer services that can take place during the wake, and which may be led by a priest, deacon or lay person. The Vigil is similar to the Liturgy of the Word at Sunday Mass, and is composed of the introductory rite, readings and psalm, some prayers of intercession, and a concluding rite.

Reception of the body at the church

The rite of reception of the body at the church may take place on the evening before the funeral Mass or on the day of the funeral itself. This ceremony has great significance because the church is the place where the community of faith gathers for worship, and where the deceased also worshipped. It is the place where people enter into new life through baptism and participation in the Eucharist. It is now the place where the community gathers to greet the deceased as one of their own.

The rite of reception of the body begins with the sprinkling with water at the church door, the procession into the church, and opening prayer. The readings and a brief homily follow. Their purpose is to proclaim our hope in the resurrection and to offer support to those who mourn. The service ends with the prayers of intercession, Our Father, and a concluding prayer.

Use of Christian symbols

Some important symbols are used during the funeral liturgies.

The Paschal Candle is placed close to the coffin when it is received at the church. It reminds us of Christ's presence among us and of his victory over death, a victory in which we share through our baptism.

Holy water is used to sprinkle the coffin when it is received at the church, and during the final commendation at the end of the funeral Mass. It may also be used on other occasions during the wake and funeral: at the gathering in the presence of the body, during the vigil service, when the coffin is being closed, and at the time of committal or burial. The holy water reminds us of our baptism and the baptism of our deceased loved one.

A Pall may be placed on the coffin by family members or friends when it is received at the church. The pall is a large white cloth that covers the coffin during the liturgy. It is a reminder of the white robe that is put on the newly baptised to symbolise his or her new life in Christ. It is also a reminder that all are equal in the eyes of God.

A Bible or cross may be placed on the coffin. The Bible reminds us that Christians are called to live by the Word of God, and that it is by being faithful to that word that we gain eternal life. The cross reminds us that Christians are marked by the sign of the cross in baptism, and that it was through his suffering on the cross that Jesus won for us the promise of resurrection.

Incense is used to honour the body of the deceased, who through baptism became a living temple of God's presence. It is also a sign of the community's prayers for the deceased rising up to heaven, and a sign of farewell.

The funeral Mass and final commendation

The funeral Mass is the central liturgical celebration for the deceased. It is similar in structure to the Sunday Mass. You will already have chosen the readings and general intercessions. If at all possible, you should also ensure that there is singing and music.

After communion, there is the final commendation. It is the beginning of our final farewell to our deceased loved one. The focus is on separation, on letting go. But the focus is also on hope, as we look forward to the promise of eternal life. The priest goes to a place near the coffin. He invites us to pray in silence for our deceased loved one whom we now entrust to the merciful embrace of God. The coffin is then sprinkled with holy water and incensed. This may be done during or after the song of farewell. The song of farewell is a high point of this rite. It expresses our hope that Christ will take our deceased loved one to himself, and that we will one day be reunited in the heavenly kingdom. The rite finishes with the prayer of commendation. The final part of the journey now begins. A hymn should be sung as the body of the deceased is carried from the church.

The committal

The body is taken to its final resting place. There we take our leave of our deceased loved one. The rite of committal is simple: the priest leads a short scripture reading, and blesses the grave. There is a prayer of committal, during which the coffin is lowered into the grave, some intercessions, the Our Father, and finally, a concluding prayer over the people. The grave and coffin may be blessed with holy water and incensed. Some earth may also be scattered on the coffin. After the concluding prayer, a decade of the Rosary may be said.

Cremation

If the body of your deceased loved one is to be cremated, the rite of committal takes place at the crematorium. Prayers from the rite of committal and

other texts may be said if the ashes are to be interred at some time after the cremation.

AFTER THE FUNERAL

The Memorial Mass

It is traditional in many parishes to have a Memorial Mass or Month's Mind for the deceased in the weeks following the funeral. The Month's Mind is an opportunity to once again commend the deceased to our loving God. It is celebrated in an atmosphere of prayerful remembrance, of gratitude, and of hope in the resurrection. The pain of loss is not quite as intense now, and the Memorial Mass helps us to move forward into the future.

OTHER CELEBRATIONS

In the months and years following the death of your loved one, there will be other opportunities to remember and pray for him or her in a special way. It is good to have a Mass celebrated on the anniversary of the death, on All Souls' Day, or during the month of November. These will keep the memory of your loved one alive, and will help the process of grieving.