

The funeral rites: a bulletin summary

By Bernadette Gasslein

The *Order of Christian Funerals* asks that we teach the parish community the Christian meaning of death, and the purpose and significance of the church's rites (9). These various rites are designed to accompany the grieving family from the time of death until the time of burial of the body or the cremated remains. It's a good idea to explain these before the need arises, so everyone understands the ministry the church wishes to offer. You can reprint the following bulletin inserts with no charge. Just be sure to keep the acknowledgement at the bottom of the piece when you use it, whether you retype it, photocopy it or cut and paste it into your bulletin. You can also download a PDF at www.celebrate-liturgy.ca.

INTRODUCING CATHOLIC FUNERAL RITES

Current Catholic funeral rites are a group of flexible, powerful liturgies designed to accompany a person who has died and their loved ones from the time of death to the time of burial—whether of the body or of the cremated remains. These rites include the prayers at the time of death, prayer when the family gathers for the first time in the presence of the body, the vigil, the funeral liturgy (usually the eucharist), the rite of commendation and farewell,

and the rite of committal. Each of these ritual moments expresses and highlights a different, but complementary element of our Catholic faith in Christ's resurrection, and our call to minister to those who mourn the loss of a loved one. The church has developed prayers for the many different circumstances of a death, and offers a wide selection of readings from which to choose at different moments in the rite.

PRAYERS AT THE TIME OF DEATH

This is the community's first expression of support for the mourners. Even when death was expected, the newly bereaved are in a state of shock. The presence of a minister—be it a hospital chaplain, their pastor or pastoral associate, a deacon, or a member of a parish pastoral care or bereavement team—can bring a spirit of peace and calm to an emotionally charged situation. The simple, familiar prayers that are prayed in these circumstances comfort those who are facing this loss, and make the whole community present.

Many people are uncomfortable with death—particularly in our death-denying culture. An equal number shy away from people who are grieving. Our Catholic faith calls us to do differently: to surround the bereaved with caring, loving support. We can do that, beginning right at the time of death, because we remember that we are responsible for each

other. The suffering of one is the suffering of the whole body.

GATHERING IN THE PRESENCE OF THE BODY

The first time family and friends gather to view the body brings them—especially persons who were not with the person at the time of death—face to face in a profound way with the mystery of death. Once again, a minister from the parish may be present with them at this time, and pray with and for them from prayers the rite offers for this crucial time. The easily-adapted rite shows reverence for the body of the deceased as a temple of the Holy Spirit. The coffin may be sprinkled with holy water, and Christian symbols may be placed on it.

THE VIGIL

Usually held the night before the funeral, the vigil is a time when the whole Christian community, including relatives, friends and neighbours, keeps watch with the family in prayer. It is often an ecumenical, even an inter-faith, event, depending on the person being remembered. The rite offers eleven different vigils built around different themes. The reading of God's word, full of hope in Jesus whose resurrection has broken the bonds of sin and death, is the core of each of these celebrations. We pray that God comfort the mourners, and show mercy to the deceased. The church designates this as the time for relatives and friends to share their stories of the deceased and tell what this person meant to them.

THE FUNERAL LITURGY

We believe that all life comes from God, and that each of us is created for eternal life. So when we gather to celebrate eucharist, we focus on giving God praise and thanks for Christ's victory over sin and death, and for the

life of the deceased. We seek comfort and strength in Christ's paschal mystery, and commend our loved one to God's tender compassion. Because the homily focuses on God's love and Christ's paschal mystery, a eulogy, which is focused on the person who has died, cannot be substituted for a homily. We offer with Christ his saving sacrifice that overcame death and sin, and when we share in holy communion, we taste the eternal life Christ has gained. Our communion unites us with Christ, with each other, and with all the faithful, living and dead.

The symbols used in the funeral liturgy—the pall, the Easter candle, holy water and white vestments—all recall our baptism into Christ's death in the hope of sharing his resurrection.

THE RITE OF COMMENDATION AND FAREWELL

We profess faith in the communion of saints, made clear in this rite. Even as the reality of separation is upon us, the rite commends the deceased person to God, singing to them this prayer: "May songs of the angels welcome you ..." We use holy water and, now, incense, signs of respect and prayer. The rite proclaims that death is not the end; we remain in relationship with the person who has gone before us on life's journey.

THE RITE OF COMMITTAL

Whether the body or cremated remains are buried, this is the hard moment when we come face to face with the grave. We bury the body or cremated remains as our final act of care, remembering that in Christ, the grave has been transformed from a sign of despair to a sign of hope in the promise of resurrection.

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