

Catholic Funeral Rites--Common Questions

General Questions:

- What is a Catholic funeral? (Is it just the funeral Mass? The vigil? The committal?)
- What is a Mass for the Dead? Is it different than a funeral Mass?
- Is it permissible to have a funeral without a Mass?
- May a funeral Mass take place on a Sunday?
- May funeral Masses be celebrated with the cremated remains of the deceased present?
- May a eulogy be given at a Catholic funeral?
- Who may preside at the funeral rites?
- Where must a funeral take place? May it take place outside of a church?
- May a vigil take place in the church before the funeral liturgy?
- What are the liturgical colors for a funeral Mass?
- May flowers be used at a funeral Mass?
- May a casket be draped with an American flag?

What is a Catholic funeral?

Catholic **funeral rites** are the liturgical rites in which the Church "commends the dead to God's merciful love and pleads for the forgiveness of their sins." Through the funeral rites, Christians "offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and the hope of the just." There are three principal components to a Catholic funeral:

1. **Vigil** for the deceased (sometimes referred to as the "wake")
2. **Funeral liturgy** (which often includes the celebration of Mass)
3. **Rite of committal**. These are outlined in the *Order of Christian Funerals*.

Vigil: A wake or **vigil** precedes the funeral liturgy. The vigil may take place in the home of the deceased, in the funeral home, in the church (provided it takes place well before the funeral liturgy), or in some other suitable place. At the vigil, "the Christian community keeps watch with the family in prayer to the God of mercy and finds strength in God's presence." Its structure includes introductory rites, the liturgy of the Word, prayers of intercession, and a concluding rite.

Funeral liturgy is the central liturgical celebration for the deceased. As such, the Church encourages the celebration of a funeral Mass as part of the funeral liturgy. However, a funeral liturgy outside of Mass is also permitted in those cases where Mass cannot be celebrated.

The funeral Mass is offered for the deceased, usually at the parish church of the deceased. "The Mass, the memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral." The Mass includes the reception of the body (if this has not already take place), the liturgy of the Word, the liturgy of the Eucharist, and the final commendation (unless the commendation will be celebrated at the place of committal).

The commendation is the prayer in which "the community calls upon God's mercy, commends the deceased into God's hands, and affirms its belief that those who have died in Christ will share in Christ's victory over death."

Rite of Committal concludes the liturgical rites of a Catholic funeral; the **burial** of the deceased generally follows the rite of committal. The committal ordinarily takes place where the body of the deceased is to be buried (or "committed") to the ground, or where the remains are to be interred. The committal is "the final act of the community of faith in caring for the body of its deceased member." The rite includes the final commendation (unless the commendation has already been celebrated at the funeral Mass).

What is a Mass for the Dead? Is it different than a funeral Mass?

A Mass for the Dead is a Mass offered for the repose of the soul of a deceased person.

Masses for the Dead may be celebrated on receiving the news of a death, for the final burial, or the first anniversary. Other Masses for the Dead, that is, 'daily' Masses, may be celebrated on weekdays in Ordinary Time on which optional memorials occur or when the Office is of the weekday, provided such Masses are actually applied for the dead."

The funeral Mass is a Mass for the dead.

Is it permissible to have a funeral without a Mass?

Yes. While a funeral Mass is preferred, a funeral liturgy outside Mass is permitted. The rite may be used for various reasons:

- when the funeral Mass is not permitted, namely, on solemnities of obligation, on Holy Thursday and the Easter Triduum, and on the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and the Easter Season;
- when in some places or circumstances it is not possible to celebrate the funeral Mass before the committal (for example, if a priest is not available);
- when for pastoral reasons the parish priest (pastor) and the family decide that the funeral liturgy outside Mass is a more suitable form of celebration.

May a funeral Mass take place on a Sunday?

Yes. However, there are exceptions: the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and Easter. The funeral Mass "may be celebrated on any day *except for* Solemnities that are holy days of obligation, Holy Thursday, the Easter Triduum, and the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and Easter." Sunday is the day we especially celebrate Christ's resurrection from the dead and triumph over sin and death. A Sunday funeral Mass, though not typical, is permissible because it celebrates the hoped-for resurrection of the deceased in Christ.

May funeral Masses be celebrated with the cremated remains of the deceased present?

Yes. Funeral Masses in the United States may be celebrated in the presence of the cremated remains of the deceased.

May a eulogy be given at a Catholic funeral?

Yes. *The Church's rites do allow a member or a friend of the family to speak in remembrance of the deceased prior to the final commendation.* This is not a full eulogy, but a brief reflection proportionate to the other parts of the funeral rites.

Catholic funeral rites do not allow space for a eulogy. The focus of a Christian funeral is the paschal mystery: the suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The funeral rites are not so much a celebration of the life of the deceased, but a prayer that the life and death of the deceased may be joined to Christ in heaven. Because the focus of a Catholic funeral is first on God, eulogies do not have a place within the funeral liturgy.

This does not mean we cannot reflect on and celebrate the life of the deceased. It does mean that such a celebration of the life of the deceased would be more appropriate to a non-liturgical gathering (for example, a post-funeral luncheon).

Who may preside at the funeral rites?

Priest. Priests preside at the funeral rites, especially the Mass; the celebration of the funeral liturgy is especially entrusted to pastors and associate pastors.

Where must a funeral take place? May it take place outside of a church?

Church. A funeral, whether celebrated with a funeral Mass or not, must normally take place in one's parish church. Another church may be chosen, given the consent of whoever is in charge of that church and notification to the proper parish priest of the deceased. If a death occurred outside the person's own parish, and the body was not transferred to it nor another church legitimately chosen for the funeral rite, the funeral is to be celebrated in the church of the parish where the death occurred unless particular law has designated another church.

Additionally, the funeral liturgy outside Mass is ordinarily celebrated in the parish church.

May a vigil take place in the church before the funeral liturgy?

Yes. Provided it is held at a time well before the funeral liturgy, so that the funeral liturgy will not be lengthy and the liturgy of the word repetitious.

The vigil may also be celebrated in the home of the deceased, in the funeral home, parlor or chapel of rest, or in some other suitable place.

What are the liturgical colors for a funeral Mass?

White. The liturgical color chosen for funerals should express Christian hope but should not be offensive to human grief or sorrow. In the United States, normally a white vestment is worn at the funeral rites and at other offices and Masses for the dead.

May flowers be used at a funeral Mass?

Yes. Fresh flowers, used in moderation, can enhance the setting of the funeral rites.

May a casket be draped with an American flag?

No. Any national flags or the flags or insignia of associations to which the deceased belonged are to be removed from the coffin at the entrance of the church. They may be replaced after the coffin has been taken from the church.

Only Christian symbols may rest on or be placed near the coffin during the funeral liturgy.