
The Dignity of Human Life and Catholic Teaching on Death



The Book of Genesis tells us that God created the human person in His own image and likeness. Therefore, Catholic tradition has always held the human person in high esteem. The Church teaches that we must treat each person with dignity because they are a child of God: reflecting to the world that divine reality.

Death does not end our relationship with God. Central to the Christian faith is the belief that God has destined the human family for eternal life. It is our prayer that God will bring the souls of the faithful departed into the eternal happiness of heaven: uniting heaven and earth in one great communion of saints.

While starkly real and total, death is “the vehicle of that final offering of self that calls for the supreme act of faith in the Lord of life” (*Reflections on the Body, Cremation, and Catholic Funeral Rites*, Publication No. 5-033, USCC, Washington, DC). The death of Christ is the “prototype” for all human death. His act of self-giving is the basis for “the mystery of the redemption of the body” and the foundation of the Church’s life. Death is not so much a finality as the “gateway” to a new life in the presence of the Triune God.

When faced with the reality of the death of a loved one, the Christian is unequivocally confronted with the mystery of life and death. On the one hand, the body recalls the deceased person’s personal story of faith, their past relationships and their continued spiritual presence. On the other hand, it recalls that our human bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, destined for future glory at the resurrection of the dead.

It has long been the Christian tradition to extend physical and spiritual care to the sick and dying. Catholic hospitals, nursing homes and hospices developed primarily to care for the physical needs of the sick. They also developed to assist the dying to live their last moments of life with dignity and peace.

The Church’s belief in the sacredness of the body and the resurrection of the dead has traditionally found expression in the care it takes to prepare the body of the deceased for burial. The prayers and rituals of the Catholic funeral rites affirm the Church’s reverence for its deceased members.

All too often people say, “Funerals are for the living, not for the dead.” For Catholics this statement is not complete, because within the Catholic funeral rites are opportunities to praise and thank God for the love and mercy He has shown to the deceased person. The Catholic funeral rites are also moments when the community gathers to pray for the repose of the soul of the deceased and offer its consolation to the surviving family and friends.

Today, however, our society does not necessarily share the beliefs that shaped our Catholic funeral practices. It is common for people to combine an exaggerated sense of privacy, individualism, and economic issues with a denial of the reality of death. The result has been a tendency to shorten the period for mourning. Unfortunately, this approach to short circuit the grieving process is a real and tragic mistake. It is tragic because it deprives the bereaved of the emotional and spiritual support they need to get through this difficult time.

Catholic Funerals

The Catholic funeral rites highlight several important beliefs and values that the Church affirms in its funeral practices. They include:

- ✦ the sacredness of all human life;
- ✦ the dignity of the person;
- ✦ the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the first born of the dead, and of His faithful followers;
- ✦ death is an occasion to comfort and embrace human mortality;
- ✦ the respect that is to be shown for the bodies of the dead;
- ✦ the importance of remembering the dead and offering prayers for them;
- ✦ and the need for the Church to provide a ministry of consolation to those who mourn.

The Mass, the memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral. (*Order of Christian Funerals, paragraph 5*)

The Catholic funeral rites should be viewed as a symphony with three distinct movements: the Vigil for the Deceased, the Funeral Mass or Liturgy, and the Committal Rite. Each flows into the other with the Mass being the principal celebration. The bereaved should consult the clergy or pastoral minister of their parish before they make any liturgical arrangements with the funeral director. This provides the opportunity to have a clear understanding of the meaning and significance of the funeral rites and it allows family members to participate in the rites themselves.

The Catholic Funeral Rites

1. VIGIL SERVICE (WAKE). The Vigil Service is usually conducted in the funeral home or in the parish church on the eve of the Funeral Mass. Here the faithful keeps watch with the family, remembering the deceased person's life, praying to the God of mercy, and finding strength in Christ's presence. The Vigil is a Scripture or Evening Prayer Service. The rosary, or part of the rosary, may be prayed as well, but not as a replacement of the Vigil. This service is often the first gathering of the faithful and friends with the family.

2. FUNERAL MASS. The tradition of the Church has always been the celebration of the Mass *with the body present*. Christians respect and honor the body of the dead, which in Baptism becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Funeral Mass includes the reception of the body, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the Final Commendation and Farewell. Funeral Masses may now be celebrated in the presence of cremated remains.

3. RITE OF COMMITTAL. For the final disposition of the body, it is the ancient Christian custom to bury or entomb the bodies of the dead in a cemetery, which means a "resting place." The Rite of Committal is the conclusion of the funeral rites and may be celebrated beside the open grave or place of interment. Here the faithful express their hope that, with those who have gone before marked with the sign of faith, the deceased awaits the glory of the resurrection and passes into the welcoming company of those who see God face to face.

Special Concerns

◆ CREMATION

The Church strongly prefers that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites since the presence of the body clearly recalls the life and death of the person. It is the Church's recommendation that if cremation of the body is to take place, it occurs following the Funeral Mass. However, if cremation takes place immediately after death, the Church now permits the cremated remains to be brought into church for the celebration of the funeral liturgy, including the Eucharist.

◆ FINAL DISPOSITION OF THE BODY OR CREMATED REMAINS

Following the celebration of the Funeral Mass, the earthly remains of the deceased are to be reverently buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum. The Church stresses that the cremated remains of the deceased are to be treated with the same respect given to the body, namely, they too should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium. The practice of scattering cremated remains on the sea, from the air, on the ground, or of keeping them in the home of a relative or a friend is not the reverent disposition that the Church requires.

To HONOR THE DEAD: Guidelines for Catholic Funerals



**Diocese of Saint Petersburg
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