



## THE ARCHDIOCESE OF MELBOURNE

# GUIDELINES FOR CATHOLIC FUNERALS

### UNDERSTANDING A CATHOLIC FUNERAL

Following the ancient tradition of our Rite, the celebration of the Eucharist for the deceased is the normal form of a Catholic funeral. For pastoral reasons, this may be replaced by a Liturgy of the Word.

The Funeral Mass is presented in the context of Masses for the Dead: *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (revised) 379-385. "Among the Masses for the Dead, the Funeral Mass holds first place. It 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, with due regard also for the other requirements of the norm of the law." (GIRM 380),

The Parish Priest or the priest or deacon designated to celebrate a funeral determines the content and form of the funeral liturgy. The wishes of the deceased, family and friends should be taken into account, with pastoral kindness and consideration. But in planning the liturgy, the celebrant should moderate any tendency to turn the funeral into a secular celebration of the life of the deceased.

"The Church offers the Eucharistic Sacrifice of Christ's Passover for the dead so that, since all members of Christ's body are in communion with each other, the petition of spiritual help on behalf of some may bring comforting hope to others." (GIRM 379)

### DESIGNATING A CATHOLIC FUNERAL

When the Eucharist is celebrated, media announcements and the title page of a printed booklet should bear one of these designations:

- Mass of Christian Burial for Mary Brown,
- The Funeral Mass of Mary Brown,
- Requiem Mass for the repose of the soul of Mary Brown

If a Liturgy of the Word is celebrated the designation may be

- Rites of Christian Burial of Mary Brown
- The Funeral Liturgy of Mary Brown

A Catholic funeral is not "A celebration of the life of Mary Brown" or "A Memorial



However, celebrating memories of the life of deceased may be carried out:

- the night before the funeral, either at the funeral parlour, or before the vigil or rosary in the church - if permitted by the Parish Priest;
- in a separate moment before the Mass or a Liturgy of the Word begins - if permitted by the Parish Priest;
- at some social occasion before or after the funeral.

### **PREPARING THE FUNERAL LITURGY**

"In the arranging and choosing of the variable parts of the Mass for the Dead, especially the Funeral Mass (e.g. orations, readings, Prayer of the Faithful) pastoral considerations bearing upon the deceased the family, and those attending should rightly be taken into account.

Moreover pastors should take into special account those who are present at a liturgical celebration or who hear the Gospel on the occasion of the funeral and who may be non-Catholics or Catholics who never or rarely participate in the Eucharist or who seem even to have lost the faith. For priests are the ministers of Christ's Gospel for all." (GIRM 385 and see *The Rite of Funerals*, Introduction, 18)

Therefore the booklet should be prepared to assist all present to participate fully and actively. The texts of the Mass should be included when non-Catholics are expected to be present. This will also be important when the new ICEL translations are introduced. The pages of the booklet should be numbered.

There are three options for the colour of vestments: white, violet or black. In this matter, pastoral consideration for the circumstances and the wishes of the family should be taken into account and ethnic customs should be respected.

The Paschal Candle stands near the casket. Other candles may be arranged nearby according to local custom.

A funeral pall may be used, covering the casket completely. The pall is white if it is seen as representing the baptismal robe. It may be adorned with Christian symbols, and may incorporate other colors appropriate for funerals.

The placing of the pall may be carried out by family members or friends at the beginning of the funeral Mass, accompanied by the lighting of the Paschal Candle and placing appropriate objects on the casket, for example: a Bible, a rosary, crucifix, flowers.

### **Choosing the Readings**

The readings are to be chosen only from those provided for Funerals in the Lectionary, Volume III, and in *The Rite for Funerals*.

Secular readings and poetry may never replace the liturgical readings. However, an appropriate poem or reflection may be read after the eulogy, provided it is in accord with the Christian hope of eternal life.



## **Music**

The music for a Catholic funeral is liturgical. What is possible will be determined by the circumstances and available musicians. Hymns appropriate to the occasion may be chosen. At the Mass, whenever possible the *Lord have mercy, Holy, holy, and Lamb of God* should be sung. Recorded music should be avoided.

Where possible it is desirable that the responsorial psalm and alleluia verse be sung.

During a psalm, hymn or music, members of the family and friends should take part in the Procession of the Gifts.

During the Rite of Farewell *Saints of God* or the alternatives (*The Rite of Funerals, 187-191*) should be sung if possible while the coffin is sprinkled with Holy Water and incensed.

Secular items are never to be sung or played at a Catholic funeral, such as romantic ballads, pop or rock music, political songs, football club songs.

At the funerals of children, pastoral care needs to be taken in the choice of music. Nursery rhymes and sentimental secular songs are inappropriate because these may intensify grief.

## **The Homily and the Words of Farewell**

"At the Funeral Mass there should, as a rule, be a short homily, but never a eulogy of any kind." (GIRM 382). The celebrant preaches this homily. While it may include appropriate reference to the deceased, it is meant to be a message of Christian hope in the Resurrection based on the chosen readings, given in a positive spirit of evangelization.

However, for pastoral reasons one eulogy (Words of farewell) may be a non-liturgical moment in the Mass or Liturgy of the Word. It should be brief and should show respect for the deceased. The Words of farewell may be shared by several people, provided this has been planned beforehand so as to be brief and to avoid repetition.

The Words of Farewell may take place:

- at the beginning of the Mass or Liturgy of the Word, that is, before or after the celebrant's greeting;
- after the Prayer after Communion, that is, before the Rite of Farewell.

## **Military Customs**

Funeral honours for members of the RSL or other veteran's organisations should be respected. These may take place after the Rite of Farewell. Alternatively, these may be carried out at the graveside before the Rite of Interment.



## CREMATION

The Church still favors the burial or interment of earthly remains, however since 1963 cremation has been allowed.

Cremation is best understood as processing a body before burial. For Christians cremation is not a religious act and it should not be confused with burial or interment. Therefore the following procedure would seem best.

1. The funeral Mass or a Liturgy of the Word is celebrated at the church as usual. However, at the end of the Rite of Farewell the celebrant does not say "Let us take our sister to her place of rest". The coffin is taken from the church to the crematorium for private cremation without prayers.
2. At some later time, by arrangement with the family or friends, the ashes are interred in the churchyard, in a cemetery or some other *appropriate* place. The committal prayers for the burial of a body are used. The place of interment should be marked with the name of the deceased to assist those who wish to visit that place and to encourage prayer for the dead.

Circumstances may require the funeral rite to be celebrated as a Liturgy of the Word at the crematorium. Any suggestion that the remains are being committed to a furnace should be avoided. Therefore the funeral ends with the Rite of Farewell. The celebrant does not say "Let us take our sister to her place of rest". The procedure of a later interment of ashes should be followed, as indicated above.

Under some circumstances cremation may have to precede the funeral rites. Only in such rare situations may the ashes be set before the altar during the liturgy, which is followed by immediate interment of ashes, as indicated above.

In accord with Catholic tradition, scattering ashes cannot be regarded as an appropriate way of treating the earthly remains of the dead. Scattering ashes in a favourite place, e.g. on a golf course or at a beach, may even imply that the deceased would want to remain there, in this world, rather than entering eternal life with God. Keeping ashes at home or sharing ashes between relatives is also inappropriate and may imply an unhealthy even superstitious attitude to the remains of the dead.

## LOCAL SITUATIONS

It is helpful if each parish can have these guidelines or a local document available to assist funeral directors and relatives.

+ Denis J. Hart

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ARCHBISHOP OF MELBOURNE