



That We  
May Have  
*hope*

**Funerals in the Catholic Tradition**

A Pastoral Letter of the  
**Most Reverend Richard J. Malone, Th.D., S.T.L., Bishop of Portland,**  
to the clergy, religious and lay faithful of the Diocese of Portland

## **Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,**

The promise of eternal life with God once the earthly journey of a faithful disciple has ended is the greatest hope, comfort and strength of our Catholic faith. As St. Paul taught the Christian community of Thessalonica:

*We do not want you to be unaware, brothers [and sisters], about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, bring with him those who have fallen asleep. [...] Thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, console one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, 17-18)*

St. Paul's exhortation that we conduct ourselves, even in grieving, as a people of hope can be a challenge. At times, our sorrow and bewilderment in the face of the loss of loved ones can be overwhelming.

Yet, everything that we believe calls us to hope. The One in whom we believe is the reason for our hope. From the moment sin and death entered the world, God remained with us to the point of offering his Son to save us. Through this sacrifice, God, who is love and for whom nothing is impossible, conquered death and promised eternal life to those who are faithful to him. Through baptism, we have been incorporated into the Body of Christ and transformed under the sign of the Cross. We have been made sharers in the Resurrection. St. Paul calls our attention to this truth in his Letter to the Romans:

*[A]re you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life. [...] If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him. (Romans 6:3-4, 8-9)*

Uplifted by the knowledge that Christ has won for us the victory over death, we can begin to understand what he proclaims in the Gospel: "Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). As Christians, our comfort is the Resurrection and the hope of new and eternal life.

Reflecting on the Paschal Mystery and the profound hope that we are called to embrace, our faith leads to action. Throughout the ages, the prayer of the Church at the time of death has been one of hope, not resignation or despair. Indeed, we have a responsibility to mark the passing of our deceased brothers and sisters in Christ in a way that gives witness to our faith and anticipates the consolation that Christ has promised us in the Kingdom of God.

As the Church, we have shared a life of faith with one another, been nourished by the same sacraments, and experienced God's grace together. The bonds that have united and defined us as God's people do not end with the conclusion of this earthly life. In death, we remain "one body in Christ" (Romans 12:5). Thus, the Church's concern for her members does not cease in death.

Faithful to the Lord's example, the Church continues to minister Christ's sanctification so that each of us may be made holy in the sight of God. Out of love, the Church discerns a solemn duty to commend the deceased members of the Christian faithful to God. Through the funeral rites, the Church prays for the forgiveness of sins and praises God for the gift of life and salvation. All of us, as members of the Body of Christ, share this obligation to commend the deceased to God. The same faith that motivates us to baptize our loved ones and nurture one another in the faith calls us to affirm our belief in the Resurrection and join in the prayer of the whole Church.

As an expression of unity with the deceased and a fervent profession of faith, a funeral is not a private event. Rather, it is a public act of worship whereby the whole community gathers in prayer for the deceased and the

grieving. For this reason, the Church has taken care to ensure that the celebration of funerals truly embodies the beliefs we hold. The signs, symbols, actions, and words which mark the various moments of the funeral rites have arisen from the tradition of the Church as ways of witnessing to these beliefs and, thus, enabling the faithful to contemplate the profound meaning of death in the life of a Christian. The funeral rites invite us to lift our gaze to heaven so that we may find hope in our sadness. Joined in prayer with one another, we are consoled, and we dare to welcome Christ into our lives during our time of grief. For as our Lord has promised, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

With all of this in mind, I ask that every funeral provide a grace-filled occasion for every participant to be evangelized anew by the Good News of Jesus. Therefore, as you plan your funeral or that of a loved one, please consider the following guidelines, which strive to articulate our beliefs and practices pertaining to Catholic funerals.

## **Pastoral Guidelines**

### **A. Funeral Rites**

#### **1. There are various ways of celebrating funerals.**

A Catholic funeral traditionally includes three parts: a vigil (wake) service in the home or at a funeral home, the funeral Mass in the church, and committal prayers at the cemetery. The priest, deacon or lay ecclesial minister who assists in planning the funeral rites will work with the family to select the most appropriate liturgical format. At times, depending on circumstances, certain elements (for example, the vigil service) may be omitted.

Also, each stage of the funeral rites provides the celebrant and the family of the deceased with several options. The funeral rites contain a rich variety of scriptural readings and prayers from which to choose. Regardless of which specific options are chosen, a Catholic funeral is always a time to pause, to grieve, and to reflect on our eternal destiny in God. In a society that tends to accommodate less and less time for this important moment, Catholic funerals provide a much-needed spiritual reminder.

#### **2. It is important to collaborate with the pastoral staff of a parish when planning a funeral.**

When faced with the loss of a loved one, immediate planning of a funeral is a difficult and trying experience. Understandably, some families are reluctant to meet with the staff of their parish, who may be unfamiliar to them. For parish staff, especially the clergy, the death of a parishioner is a uniquely privileged and graced opportunity for the Church to initiate outreach to the family, to welcome and to minister to them, to evangelize, and, sometimes, to reconcile. Thus, those who mourn will find that the assistance of the dedicated clergy and laypersons who serve in parishes is invaluable. Parish staff can help expedite the task of planning the funeral rites and make the process less burdensome. Furthermore, the ordained members of a parish's pastoral team – priests and deacons – are especially called to be Christ's presence in such difficult times. By welcoming the ministry of the priest or deacon and by providing him with a better understanding of the life of the deceased, families will help to adapt and personalize the funeral rites in a way that meaningfully conveys the Church's consolation and prayer.

In many parishes, parishioners serve on a bereavement team that assists not only in the planning of the funeral, but also performs other ministries that take place during and after the funeral (i.e., readers, cantors/choirs/musicians, altar servers, greeters/ushers, extraordinary ministers of holy Communion, leaders of prayer in the home, at vigils, and at committals, hospitality ministers at post-funeral receptions, and pastoral caregivers who reach out to the family of the deceased). These ministries, when adapted to local circumstances and customs, are concrete reminders of the consolation that the Risen Lord offers to us through His Body, the Church. Whenever possible, parishes should strongly promote participation in these ministries by the lay faithful who are called to serve by virtue of their baptism.

**3. The Church encourages the celebration of funerals with a Mass whenever possible.**

Since the celebration of the Mass is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in union with God that commemorates and makes present Christ's victory over death, funerals are principally and preferably celebrated with a Mass, our most profound way of expressing communion with the living and the dead. By offering Christ's sacrifice to the Father through the Mass, the Church pleads for God's mercy for the deceased and gives thanks for the hope of eternal life with God.

In particular, when planning a funeral Mass, the final wishes of the deceased should be respected, most especially when the deceased was a regular communicant and an active member of the parish community.

Various reasons (including deference to the scheduled celebration of the Eucharist on Sundays/Saturday evenings, Holy Days of Obligation, and the Easter Triduum) may lead a priest to decide, in consultation with the family, to celebrate a funeral *without a Mass*. Nevertheless, the family always has the option to celebrate a funeral Mass (even in the absence of a body or cremated remains) at a later date. In this way, we recall that every member of the Christian faithful shares equally in Christ's death and Resurrection.

**4. Funeral liturgies are normally celebrated in a parish church.**

As an expression of faith and support by the local Catholic community, a funeral liturgy (especially with a Mass) should occur in a church, the sacred place where the parish gathers to pray, celebrates the sacraments, and reserves and venerates the Body of Christ. A funeral *without a Mass* may be celebrated in the home of the deceased, the funeral home, or the cemetery chapel.

**5. A funeral includes a homily, not a eulogy.**

At the vigil service and/or the funeral liturgy, the priest or deacon will preach after the readings from Scripture. The purpose of this preaching—properly called a homily—is to explain the readings and thereby highlight God's merciful love and the mystery of our redemption. As Christians, we are challenged to be comforted by the truths of our faith, and the homily serves to direct our attention to these beliefs.

At the end of the funeral liturgy in the church, the priest or deacon may permit one family member or friend to speak in remembrance of the deceased and his/her life of faith, virtue and good works. Although these *words of remembrance* are permitted, the priest or deacon has a duty to ensure that the Church's funeral rites are conducted in a dignified, respectful way. Families and friends are asked to be respectful of and to cooperate with the priest or deacon in preserving the sacred character of the Catholic funeral, in accord with the liturgical practices of the Church throughout the world and the guidelines of the Diocese of Portland. For this reason, the celebrant reserves the right to review the speaker's text or outline in advance of the funeral Mass. *Words of remembrance* are not to exceed five minutes in length. It also is important to note that *words of remembrance* are optional and that the most appropriate times for offering them are at the vigil/wake or the post-funeral reception.

A *eulogy*, which focuses praise on an individual, is neither appropriate nor permitted at Catholic funerals. During a funeral, our praise is directed toward God in gratitude for the Risen Christ and his promise of salvation.

**6. Music at funerals should express our Catholic faith and be drawn from the Scriptures.**

Because of the sacredness of the funeral and its focus on the Paschal Mystery with its promise of salvation, music should be carefully chosen to reflect our shared beliefs, especially as articulated in the Word of God. Ultimately, the purpose of music in the funeral rites is to offer praise and thanksgiving to God. Thus, each funeral is linked with the common prayer and musical tradition of the whole Church, especially the psalms, which have, throughout the ages, expressed the suffering and hope of all God's people. Secular music is not the appropriate accompaniment to the sacred liturgy because it cannot express fully these values of ultimate significance.

**7. During a funeral liturgy, the pall which drapes the casket should never be replaced by an American flag or any other non-Christian covering.**

In the United States, it is customary to place a pall (a large, white, rectangular cloth) over the casket as it is received into the church for the funeral liturgy. The pall is a reminder of the white garment with which every Christian is clothed on the day of baptism and is a testament to the dignity of the deceased as a member of the faithful.

American flags and other non-Christian (i.e., secular) symbols do not belong on the casket during the liturgy since they do not evoke the same meaning as the pall. Flags and other insignia may cover the casket before and after the funeral liturgy.

However, Christian symbols such as a crucifix, rosary beads, a Bible or a prayer book are permitted to be placed on the pall that covers the casket.

**8. If cremation is desired for legitimate reasons, the Church prefers that the funeral liturgy occur before cremation.**

As Christ's Church, we believe that the human body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, and that, like Christ, our bodies will one day rise from the dead. The physical presence of the body of a deceased member of the faithful is a very powerful symbol of this Christian mystery and belief. Through our bodies, we are called to glorify God throughout our earthly life, and we pray that on the Last Day, God will glorify our bodies forever in heaven. As the guiding text for the funeral rites recalls, "It is the body whose hands clothed the poor and embraced the sorrowing...the body once washed in baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation, and fed with the Bread of Life" (Appendix, *Order of Christians Funerals*, nos. 411-12). The body of the deceased is a sign to the living of the goodness of God's creation and a foreshadowing of the new life to come.

Cremation is permitted, unless chosen for reasons that contradict Christian teaching, particularly on the dignity of and hope for the resurrection of the human body. However, in order to express the symbolism described above, cremation should occur after the celebration of the funeral liturgy. If this is neither possible nor advisable, priests and deacons may permit the celebration of the funeral rites in the presence of the cremated remains instead of the body. The presentation and placement of the urn for the funeral liturgy should be simple and solemn so as not to detract from the dignity of the body in its cremated form.

**9. Non-practicing Catholics may receive Catholic funerals.**

It is an unfortunate reality that many baptized Catholics no longer practice their faith and may consider themselves to have been away from the Church for too long to be ever welcomed again by the Church. Such individuals or their families may feel uncomfortable in a church and ultimately decide against having a Catholic funeral.

By our baptism, however, we have been made equal in dignity before the Lord, and the Church, our Mother, bears the suffering of all those who became her sons and daughters through baptism. Thus, the Church offers funeral rites (including a funeral Mass) even for non-practicing Catholics and, under certain circumstances, for non-Catholic Christians. Although the deceased may not have participated fully in the life of the Church on earth, the Church longs for her separated children to share in Christ's blessings. She desires to pray for them and with their loved ones so that their sins may be forgiven and they may dwell forever in the presence of God in Heaven.

## **B. Burial/Interment**

### **1. Catholic cemeteries are important in the life of the Church.**

It is natural to desire burial near those with whom we have formed bonds of friendship and love. As Christians, however, we also have spiritual bonds with one another that exist in virtue of our shared faith. Throughout history, Christians have been buried near other Christians in places that have been blessed and dedicated for prayer and remembrance.

Although Catholics may be buried or interred in non-Catholic cemeteries, burial in a Catholic cemetery reaffirms that we remain brothers and sisters in Christ, united even in death. Indeed, when the Church gathers at a Catholic cemetery to commend the deceased to God, we find ourselves surrounded by the graves and tombs of those who died in the hope that they, too, may share in new and everlasting life. In Catholic cemeteries, the faith of the deceased resonates with the living, and we realize that they did not die in vain.

In those circumstances when the deceased is buried or interred in a non-Catholic cemetery, the priest or deacon blesses the site of burial or interment.

### **2. Non-Catholics can be buried or interred in Catholic cemeteries.**

In this diocese, both non-Catholics and non-Christians may be buried or interred in Catholic cemeteries. This may be requested in places where no other cemeteries are available or to allow the burial or interment of non-Catholic family members near their Catholic loved ones.

### **3. Although cremation is permitted, the Church prefers the burial or interment of the body because of its symbolic value.**

Burial or interment of the body has been the constant practice of the Church, a sign of her reverence for the human body and belief in the Resurrection on the Last Day. As Christ's body was interred, so too does the Church bury/inter the bodies of the deceased. The Church follows the example of Christ in the hope that, like Christ, the dead will rise again.

The Church strongly encourages its members to continue this venerable practice and avoid cremation unless it is necessary. In death, the human body serves as a symbol of the goodness of creation and an expression of the truths of our faith. We are called to have the courage to look on the bodies of our deceased through the eyes of hope and foresee the day when our bodies will be clothed with immortality.

### **4. Cremated remains are always to be buried or interred.**

In keeping with our hope in the resurrection of the body, the Church expects that cremated remains will be buried or interred in individual graves or columbaria. In our tradition, we affirm both the uniqueness of each person and the bonds that unite us as the Body of Christ. Thus, we bury or inter the dead in cemeteries, which mark the lives of each individual, while serving as powerful, visual reminders of the community that remains after death.

Burial or interment also serves to ensure that cremated remains will be treated with respect in the future. Until they are buried or interred, cremated remains have the potential of being lost, discarded, or mistreated. Other more secular practices—such as scattering, dividing remains, co-mingling remains of one person with another's, keeping remains at home, and fashioning remains into jewelry or other objects—have no symbolic meaning in our tradition and are never permitted.

Consequently, the Church urges her members to reverence cremated remains just as we also reverence the body. To best express our beliefs, cremated remains should be buried or interred in an appropriate vessel that befits the dignity of the human body as God's creation.

## Conclusion

What we believe about death guides how we live our lives. As Christians, we must carry life's crosses and bear loss with hope in our hearts. We must gaze upon the bodies of the deceased and remember that through Christ, "the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them" (Matthew 11:5; Luke 7:22). Unlike many in our secular society, we do not turn away from death nor allow ourselves to believe that death is the end. Trusting that God "will wipe every tear" (Revelation 21:4), we stand before him in grief but not in despair. The funeral rites of the Catholic Church, which I have endeavored to explain briefly, invite us to live the virtue of hope. Through these rites, the Church responds to death by celebrating the hope of eternal life. As the Church's liturgy helps us to pray and affirm during the funeral Mass:

*In him the hope of blessed resurrection has dawned,  
that those saddened by the certainty of dying  
might be consoled by the promise of immortality to come.  
Indeed for your faithful, Lord,  
life is changed not ended,  
and, when this earthly dwelling turns to dust,  
an eternal dwelling is made ready for them in heaven.*  
(Preface 78, Roman Missal)

Given on the second day of November, the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed (All Souls), in the year of our Lord, two-thousand and eleven, the eighth of my episcopate.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Richard J. Malone". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Richard J. Malone, Th.D., S.T.L.  
Eleventh Bishop of Portland

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