

*“Light in the Darkness: Preparing Better Catholic Funerals* is a succinct and thoughtful presentation of the Church’s liturgical theology of her funeral rites. Clergy, pastoral associates, musicians, and all who are entrusted with the planning of Catholic funerals will find this work to be an engaging and helpful pastoral resource. Fr. Turner’s vast experience as a liturgical scholar and pastor shine forth in this valuable guide.”

— Fr. Matthew Ernest  
Director of the Office of Liturgy, Archdiocese of New York  
Professor and Director of Liturgy, St. Joseph’s Seminary,  
Dunwoodie

*“Light in the Darkness* is an utterly practical manual based on the author’s long experience as a pastor. This shows in the way it begins with a section on Pastoral Care before moving on to look at rituals and provide practical resources. What a treasure box the ‘Toolbox’ section is, particularly for clergy.”

— Elizabeth Harrington  
Education Officer  
Liturgy Brisbane



# Light in the Darkness

Preparing Better Catholic Funerals

*Paul Turner*



**LITURGICAL PRESS**  
Collegeville, Minnesota

[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

Scripture excerpts in this work are from the *Lectionary for Mass for Use in the Dioceses of the United States*. Copyright © 2001, 1998, 1997, 1992, 1986, and 1970, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC. Used with permission. All rights reserved. No portion of this text may be reproduced by any means and without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Excerpts from the English translation of *Rite of Baptism for Children* © 1969, International Commission on English in the Liturgy Corporation (ICEL); excerpts from the English translation of *Order of Christian Funerals* © 1985, ICEL; excerpts from the English translation of *The Roman Missal* © 2010, ICEL. All rights reserved.

© 2017 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1            2            3            4            5            6            7            8            9

---

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Turner, Paul, 1953– author.  
Title: Light in the darkness : preparing better Catholic funerals / Paul Turner.  
Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2017.  
Identifiers: LCCN 2017004822 (print) | LCCN 2017026360 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814646311 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814646076 (paperback)  
Subjects: LCSH: Funeral service—Catholic Church. | Catholic Church. Order of Christian funerals. | Death—Religious aspects—Catholic Church.  
Classification: LCC BX2035.6.F853 (ebook) | LCC BX2035.6.F853 T87 2017 (print) | DDC 264/.020985—dc23  
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017004822>

AVCTOR DEDICAT HVNC VOLVMEN  
AD MEMORIAM SVBRINI SVI  
STEPHANI BERTRAND  
CVM QVO IN PVERITIA  
REPSIT AMBVLAUIT LVSIT ET VOCATIONES CREVIT  
CVIVS SEMITA AD SEDEM DIVERSAM DVXIT  
CVIVS CEREBRVM SIGNATVM EST  
MAGIS PRO INGENIO QVAM INFIRMITATE  
QVI NON TIMVIT QVANDO ADVENIT MORS  
ET CVM QVO IPSE SPERAT  
VT CONVENIAT ET AD VITAM ÆTERNAM  
RESVRGAT



# Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Preface xi

## 1 Pastoral Care 1

*The Person Who Died* 1

*Funeral Homes and Cemeteries* 5

*The Obituary* 7

*Planning the Ceremonies* 9

*What We Are Doing* 12

*Cremation* 14

*The Absence of the Body* 20

*The Three Stages* 20

## 2 Rituals 27

*“The Last Rites”* 27

*The Liturgical Environment* 30

*The Wake* 33

*Related Rites and Prayers* 40

*The Funeral Mass* 42

*The Rite of Committal* 63

*Musical Selections* 71

*The Role of Priests* 74

### 3 **Toolbox** 75

*The Readings* 75

*Sample Homilies* 112

*Handouts for Mourners* 119

# Acknowledgments

I wish to thank

the Dioceses of Lubbock, Perth, Shreveport, Biloxi, and  
Greensburg, who invited,  
Steve Pierce and Charlie Passantino, who shared,  
Mike and Carol Mathews, who waited,  
Cathy Hernández and Peg Ekerdt, who read,  
and God, who promises eternal life.



## Preface

Funerals are a service that Catholic parishes offer to human society. They enshrine a person's life in ceremonies that bring honor to the deceased and bestow hope on the mourners. They gather family and friends to sacred space where together they contemplate the very mystery of life and death.

Although the Catholic funeral rites have not changed much since the early 1970s, society has. In the past, both liturgically and culturally, funerals followed a predictable pattern. The wake, the funeral Mass, and the cemetery service formed a familiar threefold structure. The chants were predetermined and remarkably well known: *Requiem æternam*, *Dies iræ*, *Lux æterna*, and *In paradisum*, for example. Members of many parishes provided mourners with funeral dinners of traditional local fare.

After the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church broadened a funeral's selection of readings, prayers, music, ministries, and services. A grieving family faces still more options at the funeral home. The winds of social change have made an impact as well, where secular influences arise in such areas as an expedient schedule of services, a simpler disposition of the remains, nonecclesial places of gathering, a shift in purpose from Christian hope to humanist celebration, and a preference for those who are not clergy to speak in memory of the deceased.

The post-Vatican II Catholic funeral rite in English, released in 1971, revised in 1981, and given an appendix in 1997, has undergone relatively little alteration. Although other liturgical books have entered second and third editions and received revised vernacular translations, *The Order of Christian Funerals* (OCF) has remained basically the same.

Funerals have not. The Catholic Church has lost its grip over the traditional three stages of ceremonies, the management of music, and the content and presenter of eulogies. A parish does not have much control over many decisions that mourners make. In the midst of these changes, this book offers suggestions for improving parish ministry toward those who may have lost connections with Catholic traditions and piety. Its primary purposes are (1) to prepare the faithful in advance for decisions that they will face when a loved one dies and (2) to help them celebrate funerals well. Those strategies may help mourners think not only of their memories of the deceased person but also of the church to which he or she belonged. A funeral will help family, friends, church, and community move through the grief of loss, from darkness into light.

I'm the pastor of a Catholic parish in the middle of the United States. If you are a priest, deacon, parish staff member, musician, or volunteer who helps with funerals, may God bless you for your service. I hope to help you guide your flock in preparing better Catholic funerals.

# Pastoral Care

1

## **The Person Who Died**

Normally the person for whom a parish prepares a funeral is a Catholic (canon 1176 §1). Ideally, this person was an active member of the local church, perhaps raised a family there, worshiped there regularly, made friends, and served in ministerial capacities. A funeral at church is the logical conclusion to the life of such a person. All the values and faith that guided one's life move inexorably toward a final farewell inside the building that served as one's center of moral gravity. Parish ministers cherish such a funeral because it also confirms the values that they hold. Ministers are committed to parish life, they encourage others to share their enthusiasm, and they feel affirmed when members get involved. When a faithful Catholic dies, the funeral rites cohere effortlessly.

It does not always work that way, however. Some baptized Catholics have a more tangential relationship to the parish church. They may not even know the name of the pastor. Other reasons may have brought them there for the funeral: a connection to the parish in the past, ethnic or racial traditions associated with the

parish, or the previous funerals of other family members. Parish ministers often find these funerals more difficult. They may not know the family and may feel disconnected from the person's life. Funerals are always an inconvenience in a well-planned week, but these funerals feel even more so. Ministers may actually feel resentful that a person who did not contribute much to the life and ministry of the parish now requires attention from those who do. Still, every deceased Catholic has a right to a funeral Mass, and parish ministers promote the gospel of mercy when they graciously assist those who mourn Catholics who were living at the church's margins.

Sometimes the parish has no record of the person who died. Ministers expect people to register with their parish. Registration creates a record of those who belong to that local church. It promotes commitment, community, giving, service, and celebration. Registration helps the staff understand whom they have in the pews and in the homes. But not everyone registers. In the Hispanic Catholic community, for example, the parish church is home. People don't register to enter their own home, so they may not think of registering at church. Even so, at times like a funeral, ministers will often check to see if the person who died was a registered member. Some families have no idea that they are not registered. They may assume that they can obtain the services of the church of their choice as surely as they can obtain services from any funeral home. If they are already overwhelmed with grief, a parish minister's question about registration may sound callous, making preparations even more difficult.

Parishes have boundaries that distribute the Catholic population into accessible districts. No matter where a family lives or how inactive its members are, they have a parish and a pastor because of boundaries. Today, however, those boundaries have become porous. Catholics "shop" for the church that best suits their needs, and they travel there even if it requires a longer commute. For those with special needs ranging from physical accessibility to native languages, the commute may even be longer because the choice of parish is more limited.

As a pastor, I am a strong believer in parish registration, and I remind people to update their status. Still, I have always felt a duty toward those who live within the parish boundaries. Even if they never registered with us, the boundaries grant assurance that they have a local pastor responsible for them, simply because of where they live. These funerals can be especially inopportune, but I feel that they are part of my responsibilities.

Catechumens also have a right to a Catholic funeral (canon 1183 §1). No one hopes to face this circumstance. Catechumens are looking forward to their baptism, not to their death. If a catechumen is dying, a priest need not wait for Easter to baptize. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) includes a chapter called “Christian Initiation of a Person in Danger of Death” especially for this circumstance (part II, sect. 3, para. 370–99). However, some people die unexpectedly, even tragically. If death comes to a catechumen, parishes offer the pastoral care and liturgical services appropriate for a member of the Catholic family.

Parishes can protect this right by having two plans in place: the regular celebration of the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens and a register of catechumens maintained in the parish office. The Rite of Acceptance unequivocally establishes a person as a catechumen. Making this opportunity available at different times of the year can ensure that those inquiring about Christianity can be numbered among its flock in the broadest sense. After the ceremony, their names should be entered into a roll of catechumens in the parish office in a book that resembles a baptismal register. Some individuals who begin the spiritual formation of the catechumenate discontinue it because of disinterest or conflicting responsibilities and values. However, they are still catechumens. Often they have not yet registered as members of the parish, but they have a status within the community, and some record should be made.

A child who dies before an intended baptism causes unimaginable grief in the lives of parents, family, and friends. Parents

deserve the consolation and support of the parish. Some parents in this circumstance instinctively want to avoid a formal funeral. The grief is already too much to bear. Especially in the case of a child who died *in utero*, the remains may be irretrievably lost. But for those who desire a ceremony, the parish may offer a funeral for a child who dies before baptism where the local ordinary has permitted it (canon 1183 §2).

In the past, Catholics learned that the souls of such children went to limbo, a place short of heaven, because they were never baptized. Many Catholics found this teaching an invitation to despair. In 2007 the Vatican's International Theological Commission investigated the question and published a statement, "The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die without Being Baptized." The title summarizes the conclusion: the commission taught that Catholics have a well-founded hope—not assurance—in the salvation of these infants. The Vatican apparently tried to lift people out of the realms of despair, but it could not do so completely because of the theological difficulty that the gateway to salvation is baptism. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* issues the same message of hope of salvation (1261), not of its confident assurance. Some Catholics may say that they are untroubled by such teachings past and present. Their faith assures them that an innocent child who dies without baptism still passes from death to eternal life. When it happens to them, however, when a child in their family—or of their own—dies before an intended baptism, doubts may arise. In such cases a funeral Mass with a burial service may offer consolation in a ritual that goes beyond mere words.

On occasion, when a non-Catholic dies, the family may ask about having the funeral in a Catholic parish. For example, a person baptized in another Christian denomination may have a Catholic spouse and have assisted in many events at the Catholic parish. If such non-Catholics have not retained connections to the church of their baptism, they or their families may ask if the Catholic parish can assist at the time of death. The parish may offer a funeral in this case if the local ordinary judges it prudent, as long as the deceased did not have a contrary intention and if the proper

minister is unavailable (canon 1183 §3; OCF 18). At times this outreach seems most compassionate and even logical if the deceased has been known in the local Catholic community.

There is no canonical provision for offering a Catholic funeral to a non-Christian. However, the American edition of the OCF includes a prayer for this circumstance if the person was married to a Catholic (398 §36). Perhaps this presumes that the person was a catechumen.

The Catholic Church denies funerals to individuals who belong to certain groups: notorious apostates, heretics, and schismatics; those who choose cremation for reasons opposed to Christianity, such as disbelief in the resurrection of the body; and manifest sinners who may cause scandal to the faithful—unless the person in question showed some signs of repentance before death (canon 1184 §1). In general, though, pastors should not be too quick to deny Christian burial. Church services may offer consolation to the family, and, as will be seen, Catholic funerals do not presume the moral uprightness of any of the deceased. Everyone sins.

The basic structure and content of Catholic funerals is the same for everyone, sinner and saint, wastrel and pope. The commonality of the prayers equalizes every deceased Christian, as does the pall that covers the coffin. We all end life as we began it—humans like all others.

By the way, I've decided to use the word "coffin" instead of "casket" throughout this book simply because that is the word used in the OCF.

## **Funeral Homes and Cemeteries**

Employees at a funeral home and at cemeteries provide an invaluable service to families and parishes alike. A good working relationship between the parish staff and the funeral home ensures the smooth celebration of the funeral rites and seamless ministry to those who grieve.

Most of those who manage funeral homes and parishes want this kind of relationship. Everyone truly cares about serving families in the best way. Funeral directors have their own challenges—especially from people making unusual, emotional requests. It helps to establish some procedures with the funeral homes that ensure the most contact with the parish church. This especially pertains when a new pastor comes to the parish. Even though the OCF is identical in every parish, each priest celebrates funerals a little differently.

A funeral home often receives news about a deceased Catholic before the parish does, and at times plans for services have advanced before the parish has a chance to consult the family. Depending on the funeral home, an employee may have reviewed a number of liturgical considerations with the family even before contacting the priest. This is most effective when funeral home employees have learned the preferences of individual priests and parishes and put them in practice.

Someone at the funeral home has worked with the family on the expenses incurred. Sometimes the person who has died paid for all expenses in advance, even decades earlier. Other times there is no plan at all. Almost every family expects expenses at the funeral home, but some families are surprised to learn that the parish also expects a financial offering. A parish can help everyone by drafting a policy that families may review. For example, a parish may hope for stipends to be paid to the priest, deacon, musicians, servers, the organization preparing a lunch, or the parish in general. A policy could state sample stipends or a range of gifts that have been given in the past. Some musicians prefer a set fee for their services; if so, it is fair to list their names and the amount requested. If it seems appropriate, such a policy could conclude with a statement such as this: "These figures are suggestions intended to assist the grieving family's plans. They are adjusted down for those suffering financial burdens. Other families prefer to offer more. Every gift is gratefully received."

Parishes have an obligation to bury the dead, regardless of payment, yet many people want to make an appropriate gift to the parish at this pivotal moment in family history. A policy posted

on the website and placed in the hands of funeral directors will ease the way.

If you have not done so, it is a good idea to meet with a funeral director about the plans for your own funeral. Apart from having personal benefits for you and your family, this brings professional benefits. You will understand better what the people in the parish are experiencing when they make plans for the funerals of those they love, and for themselves.

Cemetery staffs operate independently of funeral homes, but in concert with them. The funeral home often, though not always, facilitates the interrelationship of cemetery and parish staffs. As will be seen, the Catholic funeral provides some options at the cemetery, such as having people witness the interment of the remains. Ministers should know exactly what needs to happen in case of such requests.

Some cemeteries are owned and managed by dioceses and parishes. Cemetery boards typically take their work seriously and want to provide for the perpetual care of the remains of the people their community loved. Once again, a good working relationship with such boards will facilitate pastoral care and forestall problems.

## **The Obituary**

People rarely consult the parish at the time of writing the obituary. Usually the funeral home offers assistance. Parish ministers may offer general advice in conversations with funeral directors and parishioners. For example, the liturgical names of the usual services are the "Vigil for the Deceased," the "Funeral Mass," and the "Rite of Committal" (OCF 54, 154, and 216). Sometimes people use other expressions in obituaries, such as "wake service," "Celebration of Life," "Mass of Christian Burial," "Mass of the Resurrection," or "Memorial Mass." These are imprecise designations, as will be discussed below. Dioceses or parishes may develop

policies for the terminology they prefer in the obituaries of Catholics, though in reality people who read them will probably understand the commonly used terms.

Beyond terminology, other aspects of Catholic life may earn a mention in an obituary. If the deceased person was active in the parish church, some record of this participation would serve both as a tribute to the person's service and as an inspiration to those who survive. Many families recommend charities where their friends may make donations in memory of the deceased. Among these they may list the name of the parish church. If they do so, parish ministers owe the family personal thanks.

From time to time ministers may inform parishioners about the options for giving at the end of life. People can have their money or property donated to a charity at the moment of their death. They may remember the parish in their will. Even if the parish receives only a small amount, it diversifies the ways that people can give, promotes better stewardship, and gives people the satisfaction of knowing that in dying they are still giving for the sake of the gospel. It can also add a small though significant stream of income for the parish.

However, obituaries are expensive. A local newspaper may allow a few dozen words without cost, but then charge for additional words and a photo. Some families therefore authorize the newspaper to publish a short obituary that directs the reader to the website of the funeral home for more information. Many funeral homes offer free space on their sites for longer obituaries. In extreme cases, a long obituary published on multiple days in a major newspaper, or in several papers, can cost more than the services of a funeral home.

If the parish has a way of sending news out to parishioners either through social media or an email distribution list, the family of the deceased may appreciate it if the parish shares news of the death, the request for prayers, and an electronic link to the obituary. The obituary could also appear in a program printed for the funeral.

## Planning the Ceremonies

Preparations for funeral liturgies best include face-to-face conversation between someone at the parish and one or more of the mourners. Even when ministers know the deceased person very well, they can learn more from family members who see the person's life more totally and can begin to interpret its meaning. This meeting concerns pastoral care as well as funeral details. This blend of compassion and organization helps many mourners feel that someone cares for them and is guiding them through important decisions pertaining to someone they loved. Depending on the circumstances, here are some topics to discuss:

- The events at the time of death. This is often uppermost in the minds of the mourners. The parish minister may invite them to tell the story of how the person died. "Who was present? Were you there? What do you remember? If you weren't there, how did you learn about the death? What was that like?" The moment of death is a sacred moment, so letting people tell the story will help the minister step into their lives.
- The career. "How did the deceased person dedicate his or her life? Was there one job or several? How did this person make an impact on society? How important was school? Military service? Community service?"
- Family role. Beyond the career, discuss the person's role in the family. "How was she as a mother?" "What kind of dad was he?" Or if the spouse survives, "How many years were you together? How was he (she) as a companion for life? What are your favorite memories of this person's role in your family?"
- Biographical details. The minister may ask about the person's youth, school activities, hobbies, pastimes—anything that will give an insight into the person and how the family will remember his or her life. Some family members tell stories of success; others remember stories of struggle.

I take notes on all of this to help me minister to this family and to prepare the homily. When I preach, I don't give a complete report of everything I've learned, but I often share some of the fruits of this conversation. I believe it adds depth and consolation to the homily.

Some mourners may agree to take part in the ceremonies. Here are some roles that they may fill:

- Placing the pall. When the coffin arrives at the church, a large white pall is placed on top. Members of the family may perform this gesture.
- Selecting the readings. Some family members want to spend time thinking about the passages to be proclaimed at the vigil for the deceased or at the funeral Mass. If so, they may be given a list of citations to review, or someone from the parish may suggest a smaller list of readings that seem especially pertinent. The chart in the Toolbox section of this book will help (see pp. 97–99). Such conversations help family members dialogue between the life of the person they've lost and the living word of God. When they hear one of these readings at some other event in the future, they may recall more clearly that they chose it for this funeral. Other times, family members prefer that the priest or someone from the parish choose the citations on their behalf. They may have so many decisions to make already that having someone else choose the readings offers relief.
- Proclaiming the readings. Scriptures may be proclaimed at the vigil for the deceased, the funeral Mass, and at the cemetery. If someone already serving as a reader at Sunday Mass is a member of the family or close friend, that person makes the best choice. Sometimes others with little or no experience of reading in public offer to perform this function. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it does not. People may not know when to approach the ambo for a reading, how to execute the rever-

ences customary to the local community, where to find the reading, and how to use a microphone. Funerals are emotional; some people may not realize how difficult it could be for them to stand up in public in front of a microphone and read—without dissolving into tears. A skilled reader will usually be up to the challenge.

- **Procession of the gifts.** Ideally, the people presenting the bread and wine at a funeral Mass are among those who will be receiving communion. The offerings, which will be consecrated and returned to the people in communion, are a sign of the sacrifice of the community. Sometimes people like to involve non-Catholic members of the family or friends because they are ineligible for communion. Inviting them to bring up the gifts but not receive communion, however, is a bit like inviting people to bring food over for dinner but not to stay and eat it.
- **Communion ministers.** If there are extraordinary ministers of holy communion among the family and friends, they may help with communion at a funeral Mass. If not, these ministers may be drawn from the parish community.
- **Musicians.** Normally it is best to let the parish musicians lead the singing. They are most familiar with repertoire and with liturgical guidelines. Still, if a family member or friend wishes to contribute music to the event, this can be discussed. The primary singers at a funeral, however, are the members of the assembly, not a soloist.
- **Ushers and greeters.** As people arrive for the funeral, first-time visitors to the church will appreciate having someone at the doors to welcome them and answer any questions about the building and the upcoming service. This may be as simple as directing people to restrooms or as complex as explaining the building's art and architecture.
- **Servers.** The parish altar servers usually make the best choice for this ministry at a funeral Mass. However, on occasion there may be altar servers in the family who could help. If the funeral takes place during school hours, it may difficult to

find children available for this ministry. Adult servers often fulfill this role capably.

You may want to prepare a simple form listing the possible ways for people to become involved. Print it on parish stationery with an email address where the family can return the names of the people they suggest. Let them take the form home and think it over.

You may also schedule time for the readers to practice in church with a competent reader from the parish.

## **What We Are Doing**

The main liturgical celebration after a Catholic dies is the funeral Mass. That is its title in the OCF. Not all use it. For example, some people refer to this Mass as a “Celebration of Life.” The title can be seen in obituaries and funeral programs, and it can be heard in announcements and greetings. The title “Celebration of Life” appears to serve two purposes: it aims to change the mood from grief to celebration, and it looks back with favor over the life lived, rather than forward in hope over the life to come.

Other Catholics and parishes call the ceremony the “Mass of the Resurrection.” This seems to render a final favorable judgment on the eternal salvation of the deceased. There are problems with this designation, of course. First of all, God—not the parish—is the judge of human life. The question of resurrection is in God’s hands, and the prayers of the funeral liturgy acknowledge this with respect and humility. The obituary and the parish funeral program should not usurp the role of Christ the judge of the world. Another difficulty is that “Mass of the Resurrection” resembles the title that the Missal uses for another occasion: Easter Sunday of the Resurrection of the Lord, Mass during the Day. If there is a Mass of the Resurrection, it’s Easter. And it’s the Mass of the *Lord’s* resurrection.

Another common designation is the term “Memorial Mass,” which usually indicates a Mass after burial at which the mourners are present, but not the body. The OCF never uses this term. The Missal simply calls it a “Mass for the Dead.” One could argue that it is the funeral Mass because there is no other one, even though this Mass does not include the extra rites that pertain to the body. The term “Memorial Mass,” however, is broadly used and understood, even though the official liturgy does not employ the title.

The term “Mass of Christian Burial” probably evolved to distinguish it from the “Memorial Mass.” It indicates the Mass with the remains of the deceased present in the church. Of course, not every deceased Catholic is being buried, as will be discussed below. Some remains are placed in mausoleums or columbaria, and some ashes are kept privately or scattered in the open. The OCF does not use the expression “Mass of Christian Burial,” which now seems prescient, given the later developments in the disposition of remains. It consistently uses the term “Funeral Mass.”

The preconciliar funeral rite conveyed a sense of contrition and fear. The priest wore black vestments, which seemed to underscore the sadness of death. The music included the *Dies iræ*, the sequence that was sung before the gospel introducing themes of fear about the final judgment and the potential day of wrath that awaited a deceased, unrepentant sinner. After Vatican II, the funeral liturgy turned its course in another direction, framing the pertinent rites within one of the council’s favorite themes: the paschal mystery. Whereas past Catholic piety may have dwelled too intently on the cross, the paschal mystery embraces both cross and resurrection, reality and hope.

Some people, however, have turned the funeral rites into mini-canonization proceedings, celebrating resurrection before any divine judgment could possibly be known. The paschal mystery is not just the mystery of the resurrection any more than it is just the mystery of the cross. It is both. And within that dynamic lies true Catholic faith.

What we are doing at a funeral, then, is praying for the soul of the one who has died. Instead of proclaiming with assurance that the deceased is now in heaven, the Catholic funeral liturgy proclaims hope in the resurrection, places judgment in God's hands, and prays fervently on behalf of the deceased. I try to make the words of comfort I speak privately consonant with the words of hope I speak publicly at the funeral Mass. You'll find more on this in the remarks on the homily below.

## **Cremation**

The Catholic Church permits cremation, as long as it is not chosen for anti-Catholic purposes (canon 1176 §3), such as disbelief in the resurrection of the body or a belief that one's material body is not sacred. People sometimes view the Catholic Church's hesitations about cremation as antiquated. The American Catholic bishops realized that the OCF did not sufficiently treat cremation, so their Committee on the Liturgy published an appendix that included "Reflections on the Body, Cremation, and Catholic Funeral Rites."

These first laid out arguments in favor of burial, which is the ancient Christian custom (OCF 19). After all, this is the body that received the sacraments and awaits the final resurrection, as the church proclaims each Sunday in the Creed. These points are made in the appendix to the Order of Christian Funerals (OCFa 412). Saint Paul wrote that Christ would change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body (Phil 3:21), and that, just as our body bore the image of the earthly Jesus, so it will also bear his image in heaven (1 Cor 15:49). Even though nearly half of Americans were choosing cremation in the first decades of the twenty-first century, the Catholic Church prefers that the body be present for the funeral rites (OCFa 413).

Nonetheless, the bishops permitted cremation when "extraordinary circumstances" make it "the only feasible choice" (OCFa

415). It is no secret that people are choosing cremation not when it is the only feasible choice, but in quite ordinary circumstances when other choices exist. They choose cremation for its simplicity, its lower cost, the flexibility to choose the date for the funeral, environmental concerns, space available in a preferred cemetery, and the options it provides for the final disposition of one's remains. These reasons are serious, well considered, and based on values that of themselves cohere with Catholic morality.

But the American bishops' dossier of reasons for displaying a complete dead body at a vigil service, receiving a body in church, and burying a body in a cemetery is impressive:

- Seeing the body confronts people with the mystery of life and death.
- The body naturally recalls stories of faith, family and friendship, the words a person spoke, the deeds a person performed.
- Although we have virtual electronic friendships, people best encounter another person through the body.
- The body experienced the sacraments: being washed in baptism and anointed in confirmation, and by eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ in communion.
- The body is destined for the glory of the resurrection.
- The final care of the body demonstrates dignity for the whole person.
- Burial imitates the burial of Jesus' body, and thus constitutes another layer of discipleship (see OCFa 411–12).

Before opting for cremation, Christians do well to consider the significance of the body, its impact upon mourners, the memories it summons, and the hope it promises to faithful disciples of Christ.

Some crematoriums permit mourners to be present at the time of cremation. Not many people ask for this, but if they do, it may be possible for them to sit next to the furnace, or in an adjacent

room. There they may be at prayer and in reflection, present to the one they love, while the ashes are prepared.

The OCF never uses the popular term “cremains,” preferring instead the more descriptive expression “cremated remains.” At first sounding like a mere circumlocution, this expression puts the emphasis on the word “remains.” The community is dealing with the remains of a human body. The word “cremains” removes the reality one step further. The liturgical vocabulary strives mightily to help people remember that this is a human person.

The church permits cremation perhaps in surrender to societal norms and preferences, even among faithful Catholics. Regarding the sequence of Catholic liturgical events involving a cremation, there are three possibilities:

1. *Cremation takes place after the funeral (OCFa 418–21).* The church prefers this option because it allows the body to be present for the vigil for the deceased and the funeral Mass. The symbols and prayers of Catholic funerals, passed down through centuries of observance, all predate the accessibility and popularity of cremation, and they presume that mourners have gathered in the presence of the body. In this case the body may be set inside a removable interior, placed inside a ceremonial coffin—one that the funeral home may use again on another occasion. The body is presented inside this coffin for the viewing by family and friends, creating a better final memory for them. The final commendation and farewell take place at the funeral Mass as usual, but the trip to the cemetery is delayed. The body is taken to the crematorium instead. Employees lift the coffin’s removable interior along with the body, place these in the crematorium, and begin the process. Afterward, they gather the ashes into an urn. The final step, the interment of the ashes, takes place at a later time. The church prefers this sequence of events because of the respect it holds for the body. Some Catholics do choose this.
2. *Cremation and committal take place before the funeral Mass (OCFa 422–25).* In this option, not only is the body not present for the funeral Mass; the ashes are not there either. The OCFa lists

this as the second option, which implies that it is the church's second preference. Perhaps this recalls the older tradition that Catholics were not cremated, so it would seem inopportune to have the cremated remains present for a funeral Mass. In fact, that was still the case prior to 1997, when the American bishops first began to permit funeral Masses with the ashes present in the church. The second option shares the view of the former practice: the ashes are not in church for the Mass. They have already been interred. The Mass is what is commonly called a memorial Mass, which the Missal calls a "Mass for the Dead." However, the selection of prayers needs to avoid those that make explicit references to a body in statements such as "whose body we honor with Christian burial" (OCF 164c).

3. *The funeral Mass takes place with the ashes present (OCFa 426–31).* The third option, seemingly the least preferred by the OCF, is the one that Catholics very frequently select. In this case, the cremated remains are to be placed inside a worthy vessel. Sometimes the family receives them from the crematorium in a cardboard box. Some churches or funeral homes have a reusable urn for such occasions. Visually, the vessel for the remains should look dignified and worthy of respect. It contains what remains of a human person. The vessel may be carried to the church solemnly in procession and placed on a small table in the area that the coffin normally occupies. If this option is chosen, the paschal candle stands by the remains, as it does at a funeral with the body present (OCFa 435).

One of the most serious difficulties in Catholic funerals is the final placement of the cremated remains of the deceased. Trending practices in the culture promote two extremes: the very personal and the very public.

In the first instance, some people keep the remains of their loved ones in an urn at home on a mantle. If a person has lost a spouse, a child, or a parent, for example, this provides one way that a mourner can keep the loved one present at all times. Even more

personal is locking ashes inside jewelry. Because of a similar aversion to loss, mourners can wear the remains of their loved ones. This has also prompted the practice of dividing the remains among various mourners, so that each can have part of the one who has died.

On the opposite end are those who prefer a very public disposition of the ashes. They may be poured into the sea, launched from the air, scattered upon the ground, or released in the wind. These practices disperse the ashes to the widest possible margins, in direct contrast to the practice of keeping them close at home. Some people like the thought that their remains will forever rest scattered in a place beloved to them.

These decisions are usually made with considerable forethought, and they represent a certain belief about the sacredness of the remains, their significance to the closest members of the family, or their relationship to the mystery of the great outdoors. Probably not many are thinking about their belief in the resurrection of the body that they profess each Sunday at Mass. Of these two extremes, the retention of ashes underscores the intimacy of human love, whereas the scattering of ashes professes the uncontainable mystery of human life.

The Vatican approves neither practice. In 2016 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) issued its instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo: Regarding the Burial of the Deceased and the Conservation of the Ashes in the Case of Cremation*. It reviewed the principal Catholic teachings about death and resurrection, noted current practices, and then restated and expanded the pertinent restrictions. It acknowledges that cremation may be chosen for “sanitary, economic or social considerations” (4), but these should not violate the wishes of the deceased person.

The CDF requires that ashes be laid to rest in a sacred place, such as a cemetery or a church in order to ensure remembrance by the family and community and to prevent a lack of respect, which could become more likely in subsequent generations entrusted with ashes at home. Committal to a public place also prevents superstitious practices (5).

Consequently, “the conservation of the ashes of the departed in a domestic residence is not permitted,” nor is the division of ashes among family members (6). Ashes should not be scattered, in order to avoid any appearance of pantheism, naturalism, or nihilism, nor may they be preserved in jewelry or other objects (7). “When the deceased notoriously has requested cremation and the scattering of their ashes for reasons contrary to the Christian faith, a Christian funeral must be denied to that person according to the norms of the law” (8). This final statement runs the danger of misinterpretation. It does not prevent the Christian funeral of anyone desiring the scattering of ashes, but only of those who do it for reasons contrary to the Christian faith.

Still, a great many of the Catholic faithful will neither learn about this teaching nor observe it. They may be familiar with friends of other Christian congregations whose authorities find no conflict between these practices and faith in Christ. Catholic pastors can preach reminders, but they are nearly helpless in enforcing a prohibition of the conservation, preservation, or distribution of ashes. Employees at Catholic funeral homes can repeat the message when they visit with the family of those who have died. But the power over the remains is in the hands of others. A pastor can and should educate the faithful, but he cannot always change their plans, especially when death has come and the decisions have long been made.

Some people consider the CDF’s statement on cremation hypocrisy when considering the Catholic Church’s practice of honoring the relics of saints. After all, parts of the saints have been divided and shared among the faithful, many of them encased in jewelry. Indeed, there are parallels. The desire of the Christian faithful to be in the presence of some part of a saint is not unlike the desire of family members to be in the presence of some part of a deceased member.

The main difference is that the relics of saints are meant for public veneration. It is true that many of them are in private hands, but Rome discourages the private ownership of relics. The distribution of relics falls to the liturgical office of the vicariate of Rome.

Its Norms for the Concession of Relics kept in the Reliquary of the Diocese of Rome (Prot. N. 10/09) permit the distribution of relics only for the sake of public veneration.

This differs from the practice of putting ashes on a mantle at home or in a piece of jewelry to be worn by an individual. People may do something similar with relics, but the practice is discouraged. Relics are retained for public devotion, not private usage.

## **The Absence of the Body**

Some people donate their body to science. At some point, science may return what remains of the body to the family. If possible, the funeral rite would fittingly take place before the body is sent away, in order that the community may pay its respects. However, if that is not possible, the community may gather for a ceremony without the presence of the body. This is a simple Mass for the dead from the Missal, or as many people call it, a memorial Mass. Then, if and when the remains are returned, final interment may take place with the rite of committal at the cemetery.

In some tragic circumstances, nothing remains of the body at all. Sometimes the fate is known because of witnesses to an explosion, for example. At other times, the fate is unknown, as in the case of prisoners of war, soldiers missing in action, or people in nonmilitary situations who have alarmingly disappeared without explanation. When, sadly, there is no trace of the deceased and death is presumed, a funeral Mass can and should still be held. Obviously, the family will require sensitive pastoral care.

## **The Three Stages**

The Catholic Church recommends services in three stages: the vigil for the deceased, the funeral Mass, and the rite of committal. Many families, however, are requesting only two or even just one of these. Frequently the vigil is eliminated, and the family hosts a visitation in church just before the funeral Mass. At a visitation, mourners may informally greet and console members of the family. At other times, all the services are held at the funeral home

or at the cemetery. The traditional three stages are breaking down in American Catholic society.

Social media have introduced additional means of expressing grief. When a friend on Facebook dies, for example, people write words of condolence—some about the deceased, and some *to* the deceased. If the name has not been removed from Facebook, birthday announcements will go out as usual. Friends then fall into two categories: those who remembered the death and those who did not know. The first group sends messages of grief; the others send greetings of joy. Funeral homes also provide websites where people may send messages of compassion to the bereaved. Such services allow mourners to form a virtual community, especially those who are unable to attend the funeral.

It may be helpful to review for people the purpose of the three stages. The processions mirror the journey of the Christian life (OCF 42). They join the different elements of the liturgy and help the faithful to enter its meaning. The OCF recommends that the pallbearers actually carry the coffin (41). This will not always be practical, but it would help drive home the physical action of making a pilgrimage.

Three stages also give other mourners options for when they can see the family. Many people are available only in the evenings, and they prefer that opportunity for gathering in prayer and for the social conventions of shared grief. Others wish to participate in the funeral Mass during the day. A smaller but significant group will process all the way to the cemetery. The three stages thus provide pastoral care for those who grieve.

Grieving families often do not see it that way. Some of them prefer a more expedient use of their time. They miss the one they loved, of course, but death has inconvenienced their usual routine. By condensing the visitation with the funeral, or eliminating the funeral Mass altogether in favor of a service at the funeral home or cemetery, grieving families concede to the busyness of their lives and the desire to move beyond disquieting thoughts of death.

In a culture where some of the closest friendships are sustained electronically, where members of a younger generation therefore do not value being physically present with an older family member, where some individuals work more than one job, where one household has multiple breadwinners with complex employment responsibilities, and where some parents shuttle their over-committed children to conflicting activities, fewer people are making time for wake services and funerals. In doing so, they abbreviate their mourning. They choose speed grief. Grief, though, has more command over individuals than they may realize, and a funeral done too quickly can lead into a stage of private life where grief still lurks and demands one's attention.

Pastors do not have much control over the number of stages in a funeral. They can, however, provide counsel. Centuries of experience have given the church a multitiered service that not only accompanies the final journey of the deceased person but helps mourners move through their stages of grief.

On the other hand, American funerals may be evolving. Worldwide, the stages for a funeral change in various lands. When the funeral rites were revised after the Second Vatican Council, the task was towering. Those charged with the revisions realized that the church could surely make some improvements, but it was impossible to account for all the different cultural variations.

The original Latin edition of the OCF orders its contents differently from the current English translation in use in the United States. (The first English translation adhered more closely to the arrangement of contents of the original Latin.) The change was perfectly acceptable to the Vatican because it understood that funeral rites had to be personalized in the various countries and regions. In the United States, the current description of the funeral rites presumes three stages.

In the Latin edition, however, the three-stage process is only one of three options. The other options are funerals in two stages (at the funeral home and the cemetery) and in one stage (at the home of the deceased). The two-stage option does not include a Mass for the dead, but such a Mass may take place at a later time.

The third option, a service in one's home, is unlikely to gain favor in American life. Some Hispanic families, however, observe nine days of prayer in the home of the deceased. Many of their family members and friends consider their attendance at this novena a sacred duty. The Latin edition of the OCF provides options that were removed from the second translation into English in the United States, options that some people have nonetheless unwittingly imitated.

As mentioned above, one of the tragic circumstances that seems to encourage an abbreviated funeral is the death of an infant or a child before birth. The event has so surprised the family, and their grief is so intense, that they want to move through the funeral quickly. Parents especially realize the obligation to bury the dead, but they do not want to prolong this horrific time of grief. Later, some of them regret this choice. They wonder if it would have been more respectful to have fuller services. But they were in deep grief when they needed to make these difficult decisions. Some families choose a shortened funeral for noble reasons.

Other families, perhaps not. Sometimes when I'm visiting with members of the family, they'll tell me, "Mom didn't want a funeral Mass. She just wanted something simple." And in my gut, I know that this cannot be true. I've known their mother. I've witnessed her devotion to the Eucharist. I cannot imagine that she ever expressed disdain for a funeral Mass. I don't presume that the children are lying. Perhaps on one occasion they heard their mother say about her funeral, "Just keep it simple," and in their minds that freed them from having to organize a Mass. If the family does not want a funeral Mass, so be it. The parish can still schedule a Mass for the dead for this deceased Christian. The family may choose to come, or not. But one Mass will be set aside.

The church expects that some Mass will be said for the deceased faithful Christian. The introduction to the OCF, which appears as

an appendix in the back of the American edition, says, “Pastoral reasons may on occasion require that a funeral be celebrated in the church without a Mass (which in all cases must, if possible, be celebrated on another day within a reasonable time); in that case a liturgy of the word is prescribed absolutely” (6).

The funeral Mass holds a central place in Catholic piety. The Mass is the sacrament of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. When we gather, we are present to his self-offering to the Father. We also offer ourselves in sacrifice together with Christ. At a funeral Mass, we are offering the soul of the departed to God, in hopes that the sacrifice of this person’s life will be acceptable, as was the death of Jesus. For this reason, the sacramental offering of a funeral Mass is central to the ceremonies surrounding Christian death.

At times a funeral is celebrated without Mass. There are various reasons for this. For example, in parts of the world where priests are scarce, the committal may need to happen before a priest is available for Mass. Pastoral reasons may suggest that this is a more appropriate form of celebration, as when members of the family and other mourners are not Catholic, would not be receiving communion, and would be unfamiliar with the dialogues, postures, and gestures needed for a fitting celebration. Furthermore, there are some days when a funeral Mass is not permitted.

For example, a funeral Mass may not be celebrated on holy days of obligation, Holy Thursday morning and the Paschal Triduum, and the Sundays of Advent, Lent, and Easter (General Instruction on the Roman Missal [GIRM] 380). The introduction to the OCF includes a broader restriction; it says that the funeral Mass is prohibited on solemnities—not just on holy days of obligation (6). However, the Ceremonial of Bishops agrees with the GIRM, and says explicitly that funeral Masses are permitted on solemnities that are not holy days (Appendix III). The same source says that funeral Masses are permitted on the days in the Easter octave, which are solemnities.

This creates inconvenient pastoral situations when a family requests a funeral on one of those restricted days. For example, if they want a funeral on December 8 when it falls on a weekday,

the parish can celebrate only the holy day Mass of the Immaculate Conception. The parish may offer the grieving family a funeral without Mass on that day. On holy days, this legislation presumes that Catholics who attend the funeral will return to participate in a holyday Mass, though this is most unlikely. A priest could dispense them from attending the holy day Mass, in accord with canon 1245. The goal of the calendar's legislation is not to create more grief for the family, but to situate the life and death of the Catholic within the church's articles of faith and its liturgical design of their expression. It may inconvenience some of the mourners, but it honors the faith of the deceased Catholic.

The same applies to Sundays. It is possible to celebrate a Catholic funeral on a Sunday, but it needs to be a funeral without Mass. Unless the priest dispenses them, the faithful are expected to participate in the regular parish Mass apart from the funeral. One may discover, however, that cemetery services are not available on Sundays, and the final stage of the funeral may have to be deferred.

Normally the arrangements are simpler. Once they have been made, even the family that feels as if the world has collapsed into chaos may begin to find blessed order and the restoration of peace. The funeral rites help mourners move through their grief and reestablish a sense of normalcy. Nothing will be the same, but life will continue.