



A FEW WORDS ON EULOGIES, CREMATION AND BURIAL IN CATHOLIC FUNERALS...

Catholics believe that at death, *life is changed, not ended*. Death is a passage to a new and fuller life, and ultimately to resurrection and eternal union with God. The Church emphasizes life in the funeral liturgy, although not in the same way that our secular culture does. While “*celebrations of life*” have become quite popular in recent years, the Catholic Funeral Mass celebrates the eternal life won for us by Jesus through his saving death and resurrection and is therefore a tribute to the merciful love of Christ and to our Lord’s victory over death together with the prayerful plea that the merits of his victory be extended now to the loved one being prayed for. Resurrection life in Christ, then, is the predominant theme in the Catholic funeral liturgy, and the readings, hymns, and prayers reflect an overall tone of expectant joy. At the Catholic funeral, we gather to pray for the repose of the soul of the one who has died, and to ask that God strengthen and console family and friends. The priest (or possibly the deacon, if there is no Mass) is the principal presider of this sacred action between God and humanity, as we pray for the beloved departed and for ourselves.

The Funeral Mass is offered in intercession for the deceased person because we believe that God hears our prayers for the forgiveness of the sins of our deceased loved ones. We know that we are not alone, but are supported by God’s grace, by the community here on earth and by the communion of saints in Heaven. In the funeral liturgy, we derive strength from our Christian faith, which provides the true consolation we find in the resurrection of Jesus, our source of hope in times of sorrow.

Our attention is centered on Christ, who speaks to us through the Scriptures, and who comes to us in the Holy Eucharist in our time of grief. As the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops puts it, “*At the funeral liturgy, the Church gathers with the family and friends of the deceased to give praise and thanks to God for Christ’s victory over sin and death, to commend the deceased to God’s tender mercy and compassion, and to seek strength in the proclamation of the Paschal Mystery. The funeral liturgy, therefore, is an act of worship, and not merely an expression of grief.*”

EULOGIES - For some non-Catholics, the funeral can primarily be a time for remembrance and celebration of a person’s life. For Catholics, however, the intercession for the dead and the transition to eternal union with God are the central focus of the funeral liturgy; if a Catholic funeral can be said to be a celebration of life, it is a celebration of the eternal life won for us by Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, sometimes people desire to have a eulogy, and local custom might call for one. A eulogy is a short tribute to the life of the deceased loved one, offered by a family member or close personal friend, who knows the deceased well. In cases where the family would like to have a eulogy, they should discuss it with the priest in advance. Here are few guidelines to follow:

- The eulogy is not an essential part of the Funeral Mass. Ideally, it is given at the Prayer Service (Vigil or Wake Service) on the day or evening before the funeral, not at the funeral itself in the church. If a eulogy is to be given at the funeral, it must follow Holy Communion.
- In any case, the family should indicate to the priest at the time of the funeral planning if they would like someone to deliver a eulogy.
- The eulogy should be well-prepared, written out, and brief (about 5 minutes, or one page of typed, single-spaced text).
- Unlike the homily, which is delivered by an ordained priest or deacon at the funeral and pertains particularly to matters of faith and our common hope in the resurrection, the eulogy should concentrate upon a particular aspect or theme of the life of the deceased, highlighting his or her main virtues and other good qualities. Telling one or two stories very well that really capture his or her character and personality are usually more effective than a series of unrelated anecdotes. Good taste and good humor are appropriate, and anything that would be a source of embarrassment either to the deceased or to any of the living should be avoided. (The word *eulogy* literally means *to speak well* of someone.)
- On a more practical level, the person preparing and delivering the eulogy should be attentive to and respectful of other people's time. Some attendees may need to return to work or tend to other commitments and obligations, and the cemetery staff are sometimes on a tight schedule. A long, drawn-out eulogy can therefore be a significant inconvenience or source of stress for others.

It cannot be emphasized enough that the reason for these limitations on eulogies has to do with the nature and purpose of the Funeral Mass, which is to direct our attention, even in the midst of sorrow and grief, to the promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ. If you have any further questions or concerns, please bring them up when you meet with the priest to plan the funeral liturgy.

BURIAL - It has always been the custom of the Church, since ancient times until the present day, to bury the body of the deceased in a Catholic cemetery. There are three main reasons for this practice. First, it attests to our faith in the resurrection of the body at the end of time, which we profess every Sunday in the Creed when we pray, *I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come*. Second, it shows proper respect for the body that was made a temple of the Holy Spirit in the waters of Baptism and through the Sacraments of Holy Communion and Confirmation. And finally, burial of the body in sacred ground reminds us and encourages us to pray for our beloved dead, which the entire month of November is dedicated to doing.

CREMATION - Although burial of the body is always preferred, the Catholic Church does allow cremation under certain circumstances and with certain restrictions. In the case of cremation, the remains must be kept reverently in an appropriate container (i.e. urn). The cremated remains should be at the funeral Mass. And perhaps most important, the cremated remains are to be buried in a cemetery, not stored at home, nor divided up, nor scattered anywhere, nor worn in jewelry, etc. The body is very much a part of who we are as human beings, and so we should not

do anything to it that we would not do if the person were still alive. (If we were to keep the remains of our loved ones at home or wear them as jewelry, we would do well to ask ourselves what would happen to those remains after our own death. Might they end up at a tag sale, or worse, get thrown away because nobody knows what to do with them?) Buried reverently, either whole or cremated, the body will rise again, as will our own, and be reunited with our soul for all eternity. As Christians, this is something that we should all look forward to. The bodies of our beloved dead are not charms, mementos, or talismans; they are simply resting in the Lord and waiting for the resurrection.

Revised: Sept, 2019