

# Guide for Preparing a Catholic Funeral

At this time of your loss I would like to offer you my condolences. Please know that each day those who have died are remembered at every Mass, as are those who mourn. I hope the Church's prayer will be a comfort and consolation for you at this testing time.

Preparing the funeral service of someone who has died can be a difficult thing to face. This leaflet has been prepared to make the preparations easier. May the time you spend reflecting on the Word of God strengthen your trust and faith in God's love and mercy.

Please do make an appointment with your parish priest to discuss the funeral arrangements. He will have a lot of experience of preparing and celebrating the Funeral Liturgy of the Church. He will welcome your suggestions and consider how he can then best prepare the Liturgy in line with the Church's tradition, and respectful of your particular circumstances.

I hope you find what follows helpful at this difficult time



The purpose of the Catholic Funeral Liturgy is to offer worship and thanksgiving to God, the author of all life; to pray for the deceased, and to offer support to the bereaved.

The Church encourages us to celebrate the funeral in three main stages:

- **The Vigil of Prayer**, usually the evening before the funeral;
- **The Funeral Liturgy**, which may be a Mass or a Funeral Service;
- **The Committal** at the cemetery or crematorium.

When it is not practical to celebrate all three stages the funeral may comprise a single act of worship either in a cemetery chapel or crematorium.

The Church's ministers will help you consider what is best and practical for your particular circumstances. They will ensure the services are true to the tradition of the Church, and appropriate to the one who has died, and those who gather to pray for them. Please ensure that you make contact with the priest who will lead the funeral

service **before** finalising any arrangements with the Funeral Director.

## • **The Vigil of Prayer**

This Vigil is the first stage of the farewell journey. Its mood is one of quiet support which helps to prepare the bereaved for the final leave-taking. It may be held in the home of the deceased person, in a funeral home or in the church. The body of the deceased may be present or not. The Vigil may be led a priest, but may also be led by others. It will include prayers and readings from scripture. It may include the Rosary, and appropriate liturgical songs and hymns.

## • **The Funeral Liturgy**

The Funeral Liturgy usually takes the form of the celebration of Mass, the highest form of prayer in which the Sacrifice of Christ himself is made present. In offering this Sacrifice, we commend to God the soul of the deceased in union with Christ himself. In some circumstances it is suitable for the Funeral Liturgy to take the form of a Liturgy of the Word only.

The family and friends of the deceased, if they feel able, can assist during the Funeral Liturgy in a variety of ways, for example:

- Placing on the coffin symbols of Christian faith, such as the pall (a large white cloth which reminds us of Baptism), a crucifix and an open bible.
- Placing a photograph of the deceased or mass cards on a table near the coffin.
- Reading the scripture passages or the intercessions.
- A member of the family or a friend may also speak briefly about the deceased. My guidance is that this best takes place before the Liturgy begins, or after the opening greeting. In this

way, the family can welcome everyone to the Funeral Liturgy and speak in remembrance of the person for whom the prayer of the Liturgy is to be offered. A written text, seen by the priest or deacon beforehand, must always be used.

The Funeral Liturgy usually takes place in a parish church but it may sometimes be appropriate to hold it in the chapel of a cemetery or crematorium.

## • **The Committal**

The final act of saying farewell takes place in a brief service at the graveside or at the crematorium. When a body is cremated it is encouraged that there be a further brief service, some time later, for the burial of the ashes.

## **Music at Funerals**

The Church gives priority to the singing of the Order of Mass - the Alleluia, the Holy, and Great Amen, for example, and the songs proper to the Funeral Rite, for example the Song of Farewell. The priest will be able to discuss which version of these will be most fitting.

Music at a Funeral Liturgy should always be drawn from the broad repertoire of Christian hymns and compositions. A piece of music from another source may be used after the formal Liturgy has finished provided there is nothing in it inconsistent with the sacred nature of the place and the occasion.

In considering what to sing, do take into account the likely congregation and how they will respond to the invitation to sing. If the congregation is small, or unfamiliar with singing, it may be better to rely more on the organ or other instrumental music than song only.

# Preparing the Prayer

In preparing for a funeral there are many things to prepare and consider. Preparing the Prayer, the Liturgy, the Funeral services, is only one of them.

Also important is the reception afterwards. Often this will be the better place for the display of photos and the use of popular music that was particularly liked by the person who has died, or is associated with them by others. These things can encourage conversation and the sharing of personal memories of the one who has died, in ways that are especially helpful to the bereaved, to family and friends.

In the funeral services we particularly focus on the things of faith, and how these give us hope for ourselves and for the person who has died even in the midst of the pain of bereavement. In other gatherings before and after the funeral services our attention is much more singly on the person themselves, and the place they have in our lives.

- ***Who will help me plan the funeral services?***

The priest, deacon, or other nominated members of the parish community will be happy to help.

- ***Can I help choose the songs and readings?***

Yes, and the priest will help you select from the range of approved readings from Scripture and of hymns and songs appropriate for use at Catholic worship. As already noted other music and readings can find their proper place elsewhere - for example in the social gathering following the funeral.

# Other practicalities

## ***Funeral directors***

If the deceased had a pre-paid funeral plan a number of features regarding the funeral will already have been agreed and paid for. Otherwise choosing a funeral director is a matter for the family. Your parish priest may be able to provide you with contact details of a number of local companies that you can select from with confidence. It is common to invite estimates of costs from different firms before making your final choice

Your funeral director will advise you on the options and costs of the service they can provide. There is often a higher cost for a funeral which includes burial. Those choosing burial will also need to consider the upkeep of the grave.

A stipend or offering to the parish for the services of the priest/deacon leading the funeral service(s) is usual. In the Archdiocese of Westminster a standard fee is set by a parish or deanery. This stipend is usually included automatically in the account prepared by the Funeral Director, although the family is free to make its own arrangements. There is usually an additional fee for an organist or other musician.

## ***When will the funeral take place?***

The funeral director will liaise with family, parish and cemetery/crematorium to arrange the day and time of the funeral service(s). Generally nothing can be done until a death has been registered.

If the cause of death is clear, the doctor will issue a medical certificate and a notice with information on how to register the death so that funeral arrangements can then be made. If there is need to report the death to the coroner (for example when no doctor can issue a medical certificate of cause of death, if a death is judged unnatural or suspicious, or if a

person dies during an operation), there may be a delay while a post mortem or inquest is carried out.

## Scripture Readings

*The Word of God is a source of encouragement and consolation for the faithful of God. It is Jesus who speaks when the Scriptures are read in church. Even when we read these readings to ourselves privately we are invited to listen for the voice of the Lord of Life.*

*The readings which follow are a brief selection of those approved for use at Catholic funeral services. They can also serve as a source of spiritual reading in the days and weeks that follow the funeral service. For the full selection of approved readings please follow the links on the diocesan website ([www.rcdow.org.uk](http://www.rcdow.org.uk)) to Liturgy: resources*

## Old Testament Readings

- **Wisdom** 3:1–6. 9

*He accepted them as a holocaust.*

The souls of the virtuous are in the hands of God, no torment shall ever touch them.

In the eyes of the unwise, they did appear to die, their going looked like a disaster, their leaving us, like annihilation; but they are in peace.

If they experienced punishment as men see it, their hope was rich with immortality; slight was their affliction, great will their blessing be. God has put them to the test and proved them worthy to be with him; he has tested them like gold in a furnace, and accepted them as a holocaust.

They who trust in him will understand the truth, those who are faithful will live with him in love; for grace and mercy await those he has chosen.

- **Isaiah** 25:6–9

*The Lord will destroy Death for ever.*

On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will prepare for all peoples a banquet of rich food. On this mountain he will remove the mourning veil covering all peoples, and the shroud enwrapping all nations, he will destroy Death for ever. The Lord will wipe away the tears from every cheek; he will take away his people's shame everywhere on earth, for the Lord has said so. That day, it will be said: 'See, this is our God in whom we hoped for salvation; the Lord is the one in whom we hoped. We exult and we rejoice that he has saved us'.

## New Testament Readings

- **Apocalypse** 21:1–7

*There will be no more death.*

I, John, saw a new heaven and a new earth; the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now, and there was no

### How many readings?

At every Catholic service there is at least one reading from scripture. At the principal funeral service there are usually two, (a Gospel reading: and a reading taken from elsewhere in the Old or New Testaments).

### Who reads them?

The Gospel reading is read by the priest or deacon. The other Scripture reading(s) may be read by family members or friends. Please be sure to choose a reader who is able to read clearly and audibly, so that those present guests will be able to hear the reading you have chosen. (If you feel that family members or friends will not be able to read, then please let the priest know, and he will happily arrange for one of the regular parish readers to read the chosen readings at the funeral.

longer any sea. I saw the holy city, and the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, as beautiful as a bride all dressed for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne, 'You see this city? Here God lives among men. He will make his home among them; they shall be his people, and he will be their God; his name is God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone.'

Then the One sitting on the throne spoke: 'Now I am making the whole of creation new,' he said. 'I will give water from the well of life free to anybody who is thirsty; it is the rightful inheritance of the one who proves victorious; and I will be his God and he a son to me.'

*This reading is most appropriate for Eastertide*

- **Romans** 5:17–21

*However great the number of sins committed, grace was even greater.*

If it is certain that death reigned over everyone as the consequence of one man's fall, it is even more certain that one man, Jesus Christ, will cause everyone to reign in life who receives the free gift that he does not deserve, of being made righteous. Again, as one man's fall brought condemnation on everyone, so the good act of one man brings everyone life and makes them justified. As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous. When law came, it was to multiply the opportunities of falling, but however great the number of sins committed, grace was even greater; and so, just as sin reigned wherever there was death, so grace will reign to bring eternal life thanks to the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ our Lord.

- **Romans** 8:31–35. 37–39  
*The love of Christ.*

With God on our side who can be against us? Since God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up to benefit us all, we may be certain, after such a gift, that he will not refuse anything he can give. Could anyone accuse those that God has chosen? When God acquits, could anyone condemn? Could Christ Jesus? No! He not only died for us — he rose from the dead, and there at God's right hand he stands and pleads for us.

Nothing therefore can come between us and the love of Christ, even if we are troubled or worried, or being persecuted, or lacking food or clothes, or being threatened or even attacked. These are the trials through which we triumph, by the power of him who loved us.

For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- **Romans** 14:7–12

*Alive or dead, we belong to the Lord.*

The life and death of each of us has its influence on others; if we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord, so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord. This explains why Christ both died and came to life, it was so that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. We shall all have to stand before the judgement seat of God; as scripture says: By my life — it is the Lord who speaks — every knee shall bend before me, and every tongue shall praise God. It is to God, therefore, that each of us must give an account of himself.

- **I Corinthians** 15:51–57

*Death is swallowed up in victory.*

I will tell you something that has been

secret: that we are not all going to die, but we shall all be changed. This will be instantaneous, in the twinkling of an eye, when the last trumpet sounds. It will sound, and the dead will be raised, imperishable, and we shall be changed as well, because our present perishable nature must put on imperishability and this mortal nature must put on immortality.

When this perishable nature has put on imperishability, and when this mortal nature has put on immortality, then the words of scripture will come true: Death is swallowed up in victory. Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting? Now the sting of flesh is sin, and sin gets its power from the Law. So let us thank God for giving us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

## Gospel Readings

- **Matthew** 5:1–12  
*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.*  
Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up the hill. There he sat down and was joined by his disciples. Then he began to speak. This is what he taught them:  
‘How happy are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Happy the gentle: they shall have the earth for their heritage. Happy those who mourn: they shall be comforted. Happy those who hunger and thirst for what is right: they shall be satisfied. Happy the merciful: they shall have mercy shown them. Happy the pure in heart: they shall see God. Happy the peacemakers: they shall be called sons of God. Happy those who are persecuted in the cause of right. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Happy are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.’

- **Matthew** 11:25–30  
*Come to me, and I will give you rest.*  
Jesus exclaimed, ‘I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children. Yes, Father, for that is what it pleased you to do. Everything has been entrusted to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, just as no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.  
‘Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light.’

- **Matthew** 25:31–46  
*Come, you whom my Father has blessed.*  
Jesus said to his disciples: ‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, escorted by all the angels, then he will take his seat on his throne of glory. All the nations will be assembled before him and he will separate men one from another as the shepherd separates sheep from goats. He will place the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left.  
Then the King will say to those on his right hand, “Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me.” Then the virtuous will say to him in reply, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you; or thirsty and give you drink? When



did we see you a stranger and make you welcome; naked and clothe you; sick or in prison and go to see you?" And the King will answer, "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me."

Next he will say to those on his left hand, "Go away from me, with your curse upon you, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you never gave me food; I was thirsty and you never gave me anything to drink; I was a stranger and you never made me welcome, naked and you never clothed me, sick and in prison and you never visited me." Then it will be their turn to ask, "Lord when did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or naked, sick or in prison, and did not come to your help?" Then he will answer, "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me." And they will go away to eternal punishment, and the virtuous to eternal life.'

**Luke 23:44-46. 50. 52-53. 24:1-6**

*Into your hands I commend my spirit.*

It was about the sixth hour and, with the sun eclipsed, a darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. The veil of the Temple was torn right down the middle; and when Jesus had cried out in a loud voice, he said, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit'. With these words he breathed his last.

Then a member of the council arrived, an upright and virtuous man named Joseph. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. He then took it down, wrapped it in a shroud and put him in a tomb which was hewn in stone in which no one had yet been laid.

On the first day of the week, at the first sign of dawn, the women went to the tomb with the spices they had prepared.

They found that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb, but on entering discovered that the body of the Lord Jesus was not there. As they stood there not knowing what to think, two men in brilliant clothes suddenly appeared at their side. Terrified, the women lowered their eyes. But the two men said to them, 'Why look among the dead for someone who is alive? He is not here; he has risen.'

- **John** 5:24-29  
*Whoever listens to my words and believes has passed from death to life.*  
Jesus said to the Jews: I tell you most solemnly, whoever listens to my words, and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life; without being brought to judgement he has passed from death to life. I tell you most solemnly, the hour will come — in fact it is here already — when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear it will live. For the Father, who is the source of life, has made the Son the source of life; and, because he is the Son of Man, has appointed him supreme judge.

Do not be surprised at this, for the hour is coming when the dead will leave their graves at the sound of his voice; those who did good will rise again to life; and those who did evil, to condemnation. I can do nothing by myself; I can only judge as I am told to judge, and my judging is just, because my aim is to do not my own will, but the will of him who sent me.'

- **John** 12:23-26  
*If a wheat grain dies, it yields a rich harvest.*  
Jesus said to his disciples: 'Now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you, most solemnly, unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest. Anyone who loves his life loses it; an-

one who hates his life in this world will keep it for the eternal life. If a man serves me, he must follow me, wherever I am, my servant will be there too. If anyone serves me, my Father will honour him.'

• **John** 14:1-6

*The many rooms in my Father's house.*  
Jesus said to his disciples: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God still, and trust in me. There are many rooms in my Father's house; if there were not, I should have told you. I am going now to prepare a place for you, and after I have gone and prepared you a place. I shall return to take you with me; so that where I am you may be too. You know the way to the place where I am going.'

Thomas said, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?'

Jesus said: 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me.'

• **John** 17:24-26

*I want them to be with me where I am.*  
Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and said: 'Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they may always see the glory you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Father, Righteous One, the world has not known you, but I have known you, and these have known that you have sent me. I have made your name known to them and will continue to make it known so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and so that I may be in them.'

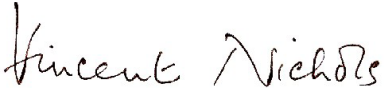
**During this time in which you mourn the loss of a loved one and prepare for the Funeral Liturgy, I assure you that each day I pray for those who have died recently. I urge you to make such prayer a conscious part of your day too, especially at this time. I offer you the prayer which follows for daily use and I assure you of my blessing.**

*Lord Jesus,  
we turn to you in our sorrow.  
We commend to you the soul  
of our loved one who has died.  
Receive N. (Name of your loved one)  
into your arms,  
the arms opened wide on the Cross  
to show your love for us.  
Grant mercy to N.  
and grant to us a strong faith in you  
and a steadfast hope  
in your promise of eternal life.*

*Eternal rest grant unto N., O Lord  
and let perpetual light  
shine upon him/her.*

**May he/she rest in peace.**

**Amen.**

+   
+ Vincent Nichols,  
Archbishop of Westminster