

Etiquette for a Catholic Church Funeral – Lastingpost.com

Introduction

The Catholic Church, which has as its head the Pope in Rome, is the largest Christian denomination with a reported worldwide membership in 2008 of over 1.1 billion.

The model for Catholic funerals is the Easter journey of Jesus Christ from death to resurrection, and accordingly the funeral is usually celebrated in three stages which are the Prayer Vigil, the Funeral Liturgy (or Service) and the Committal.

Prayer Vigil

This is the principal rite celebrated between death and the funeral itself. It 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.

The Vigil or wake may be held in the home of the deceased, or in another suitable place, for instance a hospital chapel. The body of the deceased may be present, but this is not necessary. The form of the service is a simple Liturgy of the Word of God or Evening Prayer.

Funeral Liturgy

This is the main celebration of the Christian community for the deceased person. It is usually celebrated in the parish church where the local community gathers for the Sunday Eucharist. Sometimes people may celebrate the Funeral Liturgy in a crematorium or cemetery chapel.

Two forms are possible: a funeral Mass, (also called the Requiem Mass) or a funeral liturgy outside Mass. The Church encourages a Mass since the eucharist remembers and celebrates Christ's own death and resurrection. However this is not always the best option for every funeral and to celebrate a funeral without Mass is a valid option.

Committal

The rite of committal usually follows on immediately from the funeral liturgy. This final act of leave-taking is celebrated at the graveside or at the crematorium. When a body is cremated the funeral liturgy is concluded with the interring of ashes sometime later.

While Catholics are encouraged to celebrate a funeral over these three stages, for a variety of good reasons this is not always appropriate and many combinations of funeral rites are possible. The funeral may even comprise a single act of worship either in the cemetery chapel or crematorium.

Reception of the Body at Church

In a Catholic funeral the body of the deceased person may be brought to church on the night before the funeral or immediately before the funeral service. In either case there will be a formal reception at the church door.

If the body is received at the church the night before, the reception by the priest may be followed by a longer Vigil service, which will allow the local parish community to pray with the family mourners on the night before the funeral, and also provide an opportunity for those who may not be able to come to the funeral to be present at a service beforehand.

On the Day of the Funeral

The mourners should take their places in church before the family and close mourners arrive, for whom the first pews will have been reserved.

If the body of the deceased person is brought to church immediately before the funeral service, then there will be a formal reception of the body at the church door, with the congregation already present in church, after which the coffin will be brought into church.

The Catholic Church favours the involvement of as many family members and friends as possible in the funeral service, and this includes the carrying of the coffin where willing and able mourners are available.

During the service non-Catholics are welcome to participate in, or to sit and witness, the service, but should bear in mind that only Catholics are invited to receive communion.

Although the order of the service is formal, the choice of music, hymns, psalms and readings depends on the personal wishes of the deceased and the family.

Burial

If the deceased is to be buried, the coffin is carried out of the church at the end of the funeral service. The family follow before everyone else.

The coffin is taken to the grave for the rite of committal. At the graveside service the priest will invite the mourners at the end of the service to make a suitable gesture of farewell. This may take the form of sprinkling the coffin with holy water, but there may be those from other traditions who may feel happier at the opportunity given to sprinkle earth.

Cremation

If the funeral service takes place at a crematorium then the coffin will usually disappear behind a curtain during the committal. The Catholic Church encourages the burial or strewing (burial of ashes, not in a casket, below the surface of the

earth) in keeping with the ancient tradition of Christian burial. The scattering of ashes, while not explicitly forbidden, is not encouraged by the Church.

Reception after the funeral

The funeral is usually followed by a reception at the family's home or other location where food and drink is served.

Memorial Service (or Service of Thanksgiving)

As in other Christian churches, a church service may be held at a later date to give thanks and celebrate the life of the deceased person. Many Catholic churches have a special Mass during the month of November for those who have died during the previous year.

Sending flowers or a charitable donation

Floral tributes can be sent to the funeral home or to the family's house. Flowers are generally not sent to Catholic churches.

Donations for Masses to be offered in memory of the deceased are a suitable expression of sympathy at a Catholic funeral. It is a Catholic custom to give Mass cards to the family of the deceased. This means asking a priest to offer Mass for the deceased and an offering is given to the priest.

The announcement of death in a local or national newspaper is usually the place where the choice of the deceased and their family is made known.

Modest attire

Formal clothing in subdued colours is expected at a Catholic funeral and women will usually cover their heads.

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