

The Catholic Cemetery

Fulfilling our worship and belief in the Resurrection

— by Rev. Msgr. William F. Bayer, CCCE, Th.M., M. Div.



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Importance of the Christian Funeral Liturgy

Throughout the Church's history, Christian burial has been an integral part of Catholic life. The Christian response to death must stand as a symbol of the central Christian beliefs in the sacredness of human life, here and in the world to come. The private and liturgical prayers, the meditation and reflection, and the ceremonies and rites connected with the funeral and committal express our participation in the great paschal mystery.

The liturgy of the church provides liturgical prayers and ceremonies connected with the death of the faithful. The General Introduction of the *Order of Christian Funerals* teaches that:

“When a member of Christ’s Body dies, the faithful are called to a ministry of consolation to those who have suffered the loss of one whom they love. Christian consolation is rooted in that hope that comes from faith in the saving death and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christian hope faces the reality of death and the anguish of grief but trusts confidently that the power of sin and death has been vanquished by the risen Lord. The Church calls each member of Christ’s Body – priest, deacon, layperson – to participate in the ministry of consolation to care for the dying, to pray for the dead, to comfort those who mourn.” (OCF, 8)

The Burial Rituals of the Church provide the link between our worship in life and the bodies of those who rest in our cemeteries. In 1 Cor. 15:52b-53 we hear that “The trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. This corruptible body must be clothed with incorruptibility, this mortal body with immortal-

ity.” When possible, those who were part of the Catholic community are buried in a Catholic Cemetery. Our Mission is to impart the hope of Eternal Life in Christ Jesus upon our bereaved. Our Ministry is to be a Catholic cemetery skillfully providing reverent disposition of our beloved dead never losing sight that each action should draw people to a knowledge of the sacred; *the Twain must meet!*

The Three Parts of a Christian Burial

Christian burial consists of three parts:

- Vigil and Related Rites and Prayers;
- Funeral Liturgy, and the
- Rite of Committal in a blessed grave or crypt.

“Priests, as teachers of faith and ministers of comfort, preside at the funeral rites, especially the Mass; the celebration of the Funeral Liturgy is especially entrusted to pastors and associate pastors. When no priest is available, deacons, as ministers of the word, of the altar, and of charity, preside at funeral rites. When no priest or deacon is available for the vigil and related rites or the rite of committal, a layperson presides. (OCF, 14)

In parish cemeteries there is ordinarily a priest or deacon available. Sometimes inclement weather, or if the distance is too great to attend, or some other reason may cause a priest to entrust the Rite of Committal to a cemetery employee. At other times cremated remains may arrive via UPS or other mail service for interment with no member of the family present. Once again a priest may defer the Rite of Committal to a cemetery employee.

The Vigil Service may be conducted by a priest, deacon or lay person with participation of others at the viewing. The vigil is the first occasion for the reading

of the word of God. In the Prayer of Intercession the community calls upon God to comfort the mourners and to show mercy to the deceased. A member of the family or a friend of the deceased may speak in remembrance of the deceased. (OCF, 62)

Other Rites That May Be Used

Some families omit the vigil entirely with only a prayer prior to closing the casket at the funeral home the day of the funeral. There are additional rites that may be used:

Prayers After Death (first visit by the minister);

Gathering in the Presence of the Body ordinarily done at the funeral home;

Transfer of the Body to the Church or to the place of Committal, can occur prior to the Funeral Liturgy at Church. (OCF, 98-127)

These are all opportunities to connect our Catholic faith in prayer for the deceased loved one.

“The Funeral Mass is ordinarily celebrated in the parish church.” (Canon 1177, par.1 OCF, 155)

“Any member of the faithful or those competent to take care of the funeral of a deceased member are permitted to choose another church for the Funeral Rite with the consent of the person who governs it and after notification of the proper pastor of the deceased.” (Canon 1177, par.2)

The Funeral Liturgy traditionally has been conducted on the morning of the burial but can occur at any other time if pastorally suitable. The term “*Funeral Mass*” or “*Mass of Christian Burial*” is the correct title for the Mass celebrated prior to burial.

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The term “*Memorial Mass*” refers to a Mass when the body is not present or a special Mass celebrated between the time of death and the burial.

The *Funeral Mass* may be celebrated by the priest on all days except on holy days of obligation, on Holy Thursday, the Easter Triduum, and on the Sundays of Advent, Lent and the Easter Season. (OCF, 178)

On these days the body may be brought to church for the Funeral Liturgy outside of Mass.

The *Funeral Liturgy* outside of Mass may be celebrated by the priest, deacon or lay person in the church, home of the deceased, funeral home or in a cemetery chapel. (OCF 179)

Non-Catholics may proclaim the readings outside of Mass.

Final Commendation and Farewell usually concludes the *Funeral Mass* or *Liturgy*. This presumes that the burial follows immediately after the Liturgy.

The *Rite of Committal* is the final prayer offered at the grave or crypt for interment of the body or cremated remains. Even inactive Catholics and those in invalid marriages are not denied Christian burial. “As regards *Funeral Rites*, catechumens are to be considered members of the Christian faithful.” (Canon 1183, par. 1.)

Those in an R.C.I.A. studying to become a Catholic Christian are to be given these rites if deceased before completing their initiation. The local ordinary can permit children to be given all *Funeral Rites* if their parents intended to baptize them, but they died before their baptism. (Canon 1183, par.2; OCF 237)

“In the prudent judgment of the local ordinary, ecclesiastical funerals can be granted to baptized members of some non-Catholic Church or ecclesial community unless it is evidently contrary to their will and provided that their own minister is not available.” (Canon 1183, par.3)

When Mass is celebrated for a non-Catholic, the name of the deceased is not to be mentioned in the Eucharistic Prayer since such presupposes full communion with the Catholic Church. (Principals and Norms of Ecumenism #121.)

The Catholic Church offers opportunity to include the family membership in prayer united in their belief of the Resurrection.

Significance of the Burial in a Catholic Cemetery

The disciples who had seen Jesus on the road to Emmaus rushed right back to Jerusalem to tell the rest of the disciples what had happened to them. The disciples listened wondering if it could be true. It was at that moment that Jesus appeared to them. He did not argue about the reality of what they saw. He simply said. Look at me...touch me... give me something to eat. They believed in a person. And were ready to proclaim to the world the wonder of what had happened.

We Believe That Life is Not Consumed by Death

We as cemeterians have a ministry that proclaims the sacredness of life. The reverent disposition of the body or cremated remains are signs of meaningful acts of faith that we share with the Christian community. We believe that life is not consumed by death. The Christian does not fear death but rather only the incompleteness of our life that only can be fulfilled in Heaven. The final purpose of life expressed that what was promised to us from the Lord is now fulfilled.

A story is told about a French nurse during World War II who cared for the wounded of the town. She bandaged their injuries and brought many to health. There was no doctor in the area during those years. Following the war even the priest of the town was cared for as well as his parishioners by this nurse. One day the nurse died and the town thought that she would be buried in the Catholic Cemetery. Unfortunately the woman was not Catholic and was not married to a Catholic who could have purchased space in the Catholic

Cemetery. The town folk went to the pastor to ask for an exception to the rule for this nurse who cared for the town all those years. He said he wanted to but Church law cannot permit this to happen. The pastor suggested that she be buried outside the fence of the Catholic Cemetery immediately adjoining the cemetery as close as possible. The nurse was buried there.

The next day the town folk came and moved the fence so that she could rest inside the cemetery with those to whom she ministered.

I do not think any of us would let anyone move our fences. It is bad enough that they plant where they can't; they trim instead of allowing landscaping care we provide; they pick their favorite plant off someone else's adjacent grave and make it their own, and so on and so on. And then they call you to solve their current dilemma.

Certainly such testimony of the story expresses that true fulfillment in life awaits us in the life to come. The name cemetery refers to a “*sleeping place.*” With belief, we know that God has the power to awaken us. The burial rituals of the Catholic Church as well as the celebration of Mass are part of maintaining the resting place of the dead.

We have been given a sacred trust in caring for our parishioners. For us



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Calvary is not the end. Behind the Cross is the empty tomb.

The Catholic Church strongly encourages those who were part of the Catholic community to be buried in a Catholic cemetery. Not only is the Catholic cemetery a sacred place, a place of prayer, and a place reflecting our beliefs, but it also expresses the link of community between all the faithful living and dead. It is a recognition of the shared belief of the dead and the living who commit the bodies of their deceased to this holy place.

The word cemetery means a *dormitory, or place of sleep*. The early Christians always called death a *sleep*. The dead sleep awaiting the Resurrection.

The grave, the mausoleum crypt or niche, the ceremonies of burial and entombment, the laying out of the body, all symbolize the Christian faith in the resurrection of the dead. Christians celebrated the Mass on the graves of martyrs, with their little raised mounds for altar stones. Christians sought the neighborhood of the churches to lay them down in death, hence the name “*churchyards*” and “*God’s acre*.” When unable to bury the deceased by churches, places were found by roads leading to cities. In this way the living who pass by the burial lots of the deceased could pray for them.

Choosing Cremation

It is presumed that the faithful who choose cremation have good intentions and have not chosen such for reasons contrary to Christian teaching.

“The cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the human body from which they come. This includes the use of a worthy vessel to contain the cremated remains, the manner in which they are carried, the care and attention to appropriate placement and transport, and the final disposition.

The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium. The practice of scattering cremated remains on the sea,

from the air, or on the ground, or keeping cremated remains in the home of a relative or friend of the deceased are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires. Whenever possible, appropriate means for recording with dignity the memory of the deceased should be adopted, such as a plaque or stone which records the name of the deceased. (OCF, 417)

The cremated remains should either be interred or entombed, preferably in a Catholic cemetery. This continued the link between those who worshipped together in life now presented together in death as a sign of belief in the Resurrection. Non-Catholics may be buried in a Catholic cemetery alongside the Catholic members of their family. A non-Catholic minister can perform that service or a Catholic priest also may conduct it.

When the Cost of Burial Cannot be Met

Inability to meet the cost of burial is never to deter burial in a Catholic cemetery. Some dioceses have reduced cost burial. Parish cemeteries might give a free grave but not always the interment. Church law does not allow the burial of the faithful in the church building with the exception of bishops. Columbaria at parish churches are not permitted. Hence the importance of the Catholic cemetery is maintained.

The Church urges that stillborns and fetuses of Catholic parents be interred in a cemetery. It is recommended that amputated limbs be buried in a blessed place either in individual graves or in a common burial area. Bodies donated to science should be disposed of in a dignified manner in the Catholic Cemetery following the research.

The opportunities for ministry are countless if we keep our Mission focused on serving our people in the Catholic Cemetery.

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“Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall all indeed rise again: but we shall not all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall rise again incorruptible. And, we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption: and this mortal must put on immortality. And when this mortal hath put on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? Now the sting of death is sin: and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who hath given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast and unmoveable: always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

— 1 Corinthians 15:51-58