

The Ministry Surrounding Death: Three Stages of Prayer

“Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed, in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

~ 1 Corinthians 15:51-52

In the rituals surrounding death, the Catholic Church boldly proclaims this mystery to those loved ones who gather to remember, celebrate, and pray for the deceased and to the community of believers. Through the proclamation of Sacred Scripture, the Church boldly proclaims that “life has changed, not ended.” Through the words, rituals, and symbols of the funeral liturgy, the Church recalls the Paschal Mystery – the saving action of Jesus Christ through his passion, death, and Resurrection. In the face of the emptiness death might bring, the Church boldly proclaims that by dying, Christ destroyed our death, and by rising, Christ restored our life. Through the funeral liturgy, the Church makes us active participants in this work of Christ. We become active in this story of resurrection and not simply spectators. This participation began with our baptism and now continues through the transition of death.

The General Introduction to the *Order of Christian Funerals*, the ritual book the Catholic Church uses for funerals and related rituals, states that “in the face of death, the Church confidently proclaims that God has created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death” (*Order of Christian Funerals*, 1). The ministry of the Church therefore, at the time of death, is a work that is rooted in hope and confidence. With this confidence, the Church ministers to those who grieve, consoling them with the Word of God and through the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Through the celebration of the funeral rites, the Church “commends the dead to God’s merciful love and pleads for the forgiveness of their sins. [...] The Christian community affirms and expresses the union of the Church on earth with the Church in heaven in the one great communion of saints. Though separated from the living, the dead are still at one with the community of believers on earth and benefit from their prayers at intercession.” (*OCF*, 6).

The Funeral Rites encompasses **three** different stages: The Vigil of the Deceased, the Funeral Liturgy (or Mass of Christian Burial), and the Rite of Committal. While these are distinct rituals, the funeral rites as a whole are a single movement of prayer which needs to be celebrated integrally. These three stages (often popularly called the wake, Mass, and burial) mirror the human experience of leave-taking and generally take place over two days.

The Vigil Liturgy

The vigil is often the first time family, friends and members of the parish community gather in remembrance of the deceased, for prayer and support: “At the Vigil, the Christian community keeps watch with the family in prayer to the God of mercy and finds strength in God’s presence. It is the first occasion among the funeral rites for the solemn reading of the Word of God. In this time of loss, the family and community turn to God’s word as the source of faith and hope, as light and life in the face of darkness and death” (*OCF* 56). The focus of the *Vigil Liturgy* is to remember the life of the deceased and to support the bereaved.

The Funeral Liturgy

The funeral liturgy is the central liturgical celebration of the Christian community for the deceased. “The community 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” (OCF 129). *In the funeral liturgy, there is a shift from focusing on remembering the deceased and supporting the bereaved to a focus on the Paschal Mystery and the participation of the faith community (including the deceased) in the death and Resurrection of Jesus.*

The symbols found in the funeral liturgy are primarily baptismal. It is through baptism that one is initiated into Christ’s Paschal Mystery: “You have been taught that when we were baptized in Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death; in other words, when we were baptized we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father’s glory, we too might live a new life. If in union with Christ, we have imitated his death, we shall also imitate him in his resurrection” (Romans 6:3-5). It is in the Mass that we remember most especially the work of Jesus Christ who passed from death into eternal life through his suffering, death, and Resurrection. By receiving communion, our faith in this work of Christ is renewed and nourished – a faith that tells us that by grace, we too pass from death into eternal life. For this reason, it is most fitting that the funeral liturgy be the celebration of the Funeral Mass.

The Rite of Committal

The Rite of Committal is the ritual of final leave-taking: “The rite of committal, the conclusion of the funeral rites, is the final act of the community in caring for the body of its deceased member” (OCF 204).

“The community expressed the hope that [...] the deceased awaits the glory of the resurrection. The rite of committal is an expression of the communion that exists between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven: the deceased passes with the farewell prayers of the community of believers into the welcoming company of those who need faith no longer but see God face to face” (OCF 206).

Unfortunately, a growing trend has been to compress these three distinct rituals, making the Vigil (the wake or “viewing”) and the funeral Liturgy (the Mass) into one long session either at the church or a funeral home, and the Rite of Committal (burial) a private occurrence at a later time. Because of this, there is the added pressure to have everything contained in the Funeral Mass such as multiple eulogies, special music, or ceremonies that were meaningful to the deceased or to the family. This is not the vision the Church has for how it ministers at the time of death. The Church recognizes that grief is a process and honors that reality by offering in its official prayer these different stages. Indeed, limiting the liturgical celebration of the community solely for the sake of convenience weakens the Church’s proclamation of hope in the face of death and short-circuits the human experience of grieving.

Your parish and the diocese offers many resources to help you consider these various liturgies and are there to assist you in the planning of a funeral. May they serve as an introduction – or a refresher – on how the Church accomplishes the corporal and spiritual works of mercy to “bury the dead”, “comfort the sorrowful”, and “praying for the living and the dead” and offer you the fullness of the Church’s liturgy surrounding death. Pre-Planning one’s own funeral or planning the funeral of a loved one can no doubt be a difficult experience, but our prayer is that you find it to nourish your spirit. May the Church and her ministers be companions on the journey with you.