

## **Symbols in the Funeral Liturgy**

Catholic liturgy uses the language of symbols to convey messages of belief, and the funeral liturgy is no exception to this. At the center of the funeral liturgy is Jesus Christ and his work of salvation through his life, suffering, death, and resurrection. We call this the Paschal Mystery. It is through the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ that we can hope for heaven; we remember that Jesus is the way to eternal life. More than just remembering the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that took place some 2000 years ago, the Church, through the celebration of Mass and other sacraments – makes the work of Christ present today. The Church proclaims through its liturgy that Jesus Christ is present – here and now – offering his grace to us. Thus, we do not simply remember events from the past, but we participate in the reality that Jesus Christ is with us today. In the liturgy, it is through symbols that we demonstrate our participation in the life of Jesus Christ.

The symbols in the funeral Mass are very similar to the symbols we use at baptism. Why? It is through baptism that we first participate in the Paschal Mystery of Christ – through Baptism, we become adopted sons or daughters of God and the grace of God is given to us. The grace of our baptism unfolds throughout life if we nurture our faith. We grow in Christian hope that we will be saved by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which gives us grace throughout our lives. That hope finds its ultimate expression in death as we celebrate the funeral liturgy.

Below are some of the symbols and ritual actions unique to the funeral liturgy:

**Greeting of the Body at the Entrance of the Church:** This has a baptismal connection. When a baby is presented for baptism, or when an adult begins their initial preparation for their own baptism, the minister greets them (and their parents) at the entrance to the church and welcomes them, bringing them into the midst of the congregation. Likewise, at a funeral, the minister greets the body at the entrance of the church one final time and brings it into the midst of the grieving and worshipping community.

**Paschal Candle** – The Paschal candle, which is lit for every baptism and during the Easter Season, when the Church especially celebrates the Resurrection, is lit at every funeral – as a reminder of the victory over death that the Christ won for us through his Resurrection. At a baptism, the newly baptized (or the parents) are given a candle lit from the Paschal Candle reminding them of the light of Christ. The lit Paschal Candle here stands as a symbol of the light received at Baptism.

**Holy Water** – The casket or urn is sprinkled with holy water at the beginning of the funeral liturgy, which recalls the waters of Baptism.

**Funeral Pall** – The white cloth used to cover the casket of the deceased during the Funeral Liturgy. It is a reminder of the baptismal garment given at baptism and may be placed over the casket by family members, friends, the priest, or staff from the funeral home. A funeral pall is not used to cover an urn when there are cremated remains.

**Cross/Bible** – At the beginning of the Funeral Liturgy, after the casket has been placed in front of the church, a cross and/or Bible may be placed on top of the casket and remain there for the rest of the funeral liturgy. These are symbols of Christian life: the cross serves as a reminder that the Christian is marked by the cross by baptism and through Jesus' suffering on the cross is brought to the victory of his resurrection while the Bible is a sign that Christians live by the word of God and that fidelity to that word leads to eternal life. The placing of the cross or Bible are optional.

**A Note About Placing Symbols Near the Casket or Urn:** The guidelines governing the funeral ritual states that only Christian symbols may rest on or be placed near the coffin during the funeral liturgy. Any other symbols, for example, national flags, or flags or insignia of various associations are not be used during the funeral Mass (in the case of a veteran, for example, the casket is draped with the American flag before and after the liturgy, with the flag being removed when the casket is being brought into the church and the flag being draped over the casket as it is being brought out of the church.)

**Incense** – At the end of Mass, during the Song of Farewell, the casket or urn is incensed. Incense is used during the funeral rites as a sign of honor to the body of the deceased, which through baptism became the temple of the Holy Spirit. Incense is also used as a sign of the community’s prayers rising to heaven.

**The Liturgical Year** – The time of year also is a symbol that will be present at the funeral. For most people, when a loved one dies, time stands still. While the rest of the world continues at its previous pace, all seems to stop for those who experience the shock of death. Time has special meaning in the Catholic Church. Various seasons are observed annually: Advent, Christmas time, Lent, and Easter time. These make up the Liturgical Year in the Catholic Church. The unpredictability of human death means that persons may die at very inopportune times, such as a few days before Christmas or at a special anniversary.

Funerals are always celebrated in the context of the liturgical season in which they fall. So, in the depths of sorrow, one may enter the church for a funeral Mass and find it all decorated for Christmas. On the other hand, a funeral Mass may be celebrated in the midst of Lent, when flowers are not brought into the church and all is draped in Lenten purple. However, no matter which liturgical season we happen to be in on the day of a funeral, the ritual reminds us that we are not merely grieving over a loved one’s loss, but celebrating his/her entrance through death into the Resurrection of Christ.

May the symbols used at the funeral liturgy recall the life of baptism, the ways the deceased has lived out his or her life rooted in faith, and the hope which baptism brings: eternal life.