

Why I Am Catholic – Funeral Rites

The Funeral Rites of the Catholic Church are comforting, beautiful, and very meaningful. When a loved one has died, family and friends have many options as far as masses, prayer vigils, gravesite services, etc. In the United States, a funeral home usually is involved in the planning process. And in coordinating all the details: from burial options, to visitation, to church services, to selecting a cemetery. The Catholic Church strongly prefers that a funeral mass be celebrated for the deceased. If the person had not been attending church, the family sometimes feels awkward, but with rare exceptions (scandalous behavior), the Church encourages a funeral mass. A funeral mass is also often offered for the non-Catholic spouse of a Catholic. In the Archdiocese of Atlanta, a funeral mass can only be celebrated in a Catholic Church, not in a funeral home.

Usually a prayer service is celebrated the night before—often during the time of visitation at the funeral home or the family home. Historically, this prayer vigil has often been a reciting of the rosary. In recent times, the church has developed a series of structured prayer services that include prayers, Scripture readings, and times of reflection. These especially work better when either the whole family is not Catholic or the majority of visitors and guests are not.

We still encourage the reciting of the rosary as a personal or family devotion, but the Church now prefers the structured prayer services for funeral home vigils. When a parish has a permanent deacon, the deacons often lead the prayer services at the funeral homes. If the family does not want a mass, a primary funeral liturgy *outside of mass* can be offered either at the church, at the funeral home, or on rare occasions at another location. Usually the funeral mass or funeral liturgy *outside of mass* occurs on the day of burial, but not always. Sometimes the cemetery is in a different state or country. For pastoral reasons, funeral services may be offered in different locations when family cannot travel. A memorial mass can also be offered without the presence of the body—at the time of death, for an anniversary, etc. The Church also offers a gravesite service at the place of rest. This usually involves the blessing of the ground, crypt, mausoleum, or niche and the final commendation. This service usually last five to 10 minutes and can seem very quick (almost rushed) after a 40-60-minute mass in the church and a long drive to the cemetery. Hopefully we have prepared the family as much as possible for the jarring reality of the final goodbye and laying a loved one to rest.

Sometimes the family wants a eulogy during the primary funeral liturgy or mass. The Church discourages this. We remember the deceased during our homily, but the focus is on Christ, His love, and His triumph over death. We may allow one or two short reflections about the deceased after Communion, but not a lengthy eulogy or tribute. That is best done elsewhere. In the Church, the focus is that he or she was a child of God, a member of Christ's family through baptism, and that Christ died that we might have eternal life. When the casket or urn comes to the Church, all earthly honors are removed. Placed on a casket is a pall, a white cloth that reminds us of the baptismal garment. Photos can be displayed, especially of loved ones, but no plaques, medals, or earthly awards. "Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart." (I Sam 16:7) "Remembering our mortality helps us realize that we have only a limited time in which to bring our lives to fulfillment." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1007) For more than 1900 years, the Catholic Church did not permit cremations. This was due to the pagan practice of burning the bodies of martyrs and claiming it denied them eternal life. This was a rejection of the Resurrection of the Body and a denial of the faith. In St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 15 addresses this problem directly. In modern times, the Church allows cremations with certain requirements: "The custom of according burial to the bodies of the deceased is to be commended and encouraged. If, however, the family of the deceased or the testament of the deceased request that the body be cremated or if this is required by the civil authorities, the funeral may nevertheless be celebrated liturgically, provided that the cremation is not undertaken for motives in opposition to Christian doctrine. It is greatly to be preferred that the funeral liturgy take place in the presence of the body of the deceased prior to its cremation. (*Indult on Cremation*, 1997) The scattering of remains (cremains) or the keeping of remains in a home—versus in a cemetery—is strictly prohibited and not in keeping with "the reverent disposition the church requires." Ecclesiastes tells us: "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, . . . before the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it."