

St. Michael's Parish, Gastonia

Policies – Catholic Funeral Rites

6 January 2007

“Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and the hope of the just. The Mass, the memorial of Christ’s death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral.”(Order of Christian Funerals, no. 5).

The Christian funeral is a liturgical celebration of the Church which aims at expressing efficacious communion with the deceased, at the participation in that communion of the community gathered for the funeral, and at the proclamation of eternal life to the community. (cf. CCC 1684) From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead. (cf. CCC 1032)

Our Catholic funeral rites assist everyone in the manner of Catholic mourning and trusting in God’s mercy which is taught by our Holy Faith. Great care must be taken to respect the Church’s belief in the sacredness of the body and the resurrection of the dead as we prepare the body of the deceased for burial. Our prayers and rituals do that and we respectfully follow the discipline of the Church to honor the gift of the person God gave us.

The Compendium of the Catholic Church explains this in two of the questions:

354. What is the relationship between the sacraments and the death of a Christian?

“The Christian who dies in Christ reaches at the end of his earthly existence the fulfillment of that new life which was begun in Baptism, strengthened in Confirmation, and nourished in the Eucharist, the foretaste of the heavenly banquet. The meaning of the death of a Christian becomes clear in the light of the death and Resurrection of Christ our only hope. The Christian who dies in Christ Jesus goes “away from the body to be at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8).”

355. What do funeral rites express?

“Although celebrated in different rites in keeping with the situations and traditions of various regions, funerals express the paschal character of Christian death in hope of the resurrection. They also manifest the meaning of communion with the departed particularly through prayer for the purification of their souls.”

What are the “Funeral Rites” of the Catholic Church and when do we celebrate them at St. Michael’s?

I. Vigil (Wake): at beginning or end of visitation

II. Mass of Christian Burial

(as available in the parish schedule):

Mon – Fri: 8:15 or 10:30 AM or 7:00 PM;

Saturday: 10:30 (if there is no Wedding)

Sunday: No Funeral Mass or Burial

III. Committal: immediately after Mass at Cemetery

What should I do to make plans for the “Funeral Rites”?

- Complete the Parish **“Funeral Rites Information Form”**; keep a copy; file a copy at the Parish; file a copy with your attorney; provide a copy to the person who will arrange your funeral. ***See below for an explanation of the “Rites” before completing the Form.***

What is the ordinary manner of preparing for death and burial?

- Save and/or purchase insurance to properly provide for a casket, funeral services, and burial.
- Remember that the Church desires the full body to be present for the Mass of Christian Burial and for the body to be buried in a cemetery.
- Leave instructions that someone will call the Priest when death seems close.
- Insure that someone will call the Priests for the Last Rites (Confession, Anointing, and Holy Communion) before death.
- Insure that someone will call the Priest when death occurs.

- The Prayers for the Dead are to be prayed
- The Body is prepared for burial by family or the funeral directors.
- Arrange for someone to meet with the Funeral director to arrange times for Rites with Funeral Home and Parish Priest: Times or plans for any part of the Funeral Rites are not set without speaking with the Parish Priest and knowing the policies of the parish.

Funeral Rites of the Catholic Church: Explained (I, II, and III)

I. Vigil for the Deceased (Wake)

- This is usually done as a part of the visitation, sometimes called “viewing”, at the home or in a funeral home. Only Christian symbols, flowers or notes from family are placed in the casket; nothing questionable.
- It is important for us to see the body and honor the person. This is a time of great support for everyone and gives friends an opportunity to express their comfort and offer their prayers. The body is not just borrowed for a time to house a soul; it has a value related to the person. Spending time in the presence of the deceased person’s body is important for our grieving and our statement that it mattered that this person lived.
- The grave will be a continuation of this important aspect of our funeral observances.
- The Vigil is the place for our reading from Sacred Scripture, prayers, Rosary, poems, special music and a eulogy if one is desired.
- Of course, all music, eulogies and readings should be based in a Christian context which expresses our Faith.
- The Vigil assists all to remember this person as God’s important gift to us; what is said or heard should be respectful and pointing to the good qualities of the person as God’s child.
- Please remember that during the visitation no objects which are not directly related to Christianity may be placed in the casket.
- It is good to make a collage and/or a display of pictures. Some people make a video now to show at the funeral home.

II. Mass of Christian Burial

- The tradition of the Church is to celebrate the Holy Mass of Christian Burial in the parish church with the body present facing the altar at this last Mass in the church with the parish family.
- In case of a military funeral, the flag is removed from the casket at the entrance of the Church and replaced after the Holy Mass.
- The body is greeted at the doors of the Church with Holy Water and the placing of a white Pall to remember the Baptism. The family can assist the celebrant in placing the Pall. Other Christian symbols may be placed on the casket; it is normal that the funeral home provides a crucifix with an image of the crucified savior.
- Sacred Scripture readings chosen from an approved list and the lectionary translation are used (no other readings).
- Readers must be practicing Catholics and therefore in doctrinal unity with the Church and living in line with the discipline necessary for their state in life.
- You may choose people to bring the gifts to the Altar during the offertory.
- Music is chosen from a list prepared by the Music Director; the cantors and organist from the Parish provide the music; other musicians may be utilized at the Vigil or cemetery.
- We do not use recorded music at Holy Mass.
- Before the final commendation one person from the family may read a prepared brief thank you and/or a prayer of thanksgiving.
- No eulogies or other witness talks are given. After the final commendation we leave for the cemetery.

III. Rite of Committal

- For the final disposition of the body, it is the ancient Christian custom to bury or entomb the bodies of the dead in a cemetery, which means a “resting place.”
- The Rite of Committal is the conclusion of the funeral rites and may be celebrated beside the open grave or place of interment.
- Here the faithful express their hope that, with those who have gone before marked with the sign of faith, the deceased awaits the glory of the resurrection and passes into the welcoming company of those who see God face to face.

- We visit the grave often to pray for the deceased and we decorate the graves regularly, especially on November 2, All Souls Day.

What should I to prepare for good death?

- Live a Catholic Sacramental life.
- Develop a Catholic understanding of life and death.
- Pray to St. Joseph, patron of happy deaths.
- Develop an understanding of the Catholic Funeral Rites.
- Prepare with a good Confession, the Anointing of the Sick, Holy Communion as “Viaticum”. Make sure someone calls the Priest. If you are going to have surgery which requires general anesthetic, ask the Priest to hear your Confession and administer the Sacrament of the Sick before you go to the hospital.
- If you are going to be in the hospital or any nursing care facility, be sure to list the parish priest, deacon and others from the parish whom you wish to visit; otherwise, we will not be able.
- Make advanced plans with your parish priest for the Funeral Rites; read the policies of your parish for funerals.
- Save for the expenses of a proper Catholic funeral; most people have insurance policies for this.
- Talk with family members and your attorney. Be sure your legal documents give a Catholic understanding of caring for the sick and dying. Be sure your “Will” provides for food and water to be given until you cannot assimilate it as a part of ordinary care when appropriate. Appropriate ordinary means of life support should also be given where there is hope of cure. Think of appointing a Health Care Power of Attorney with your instructions to be followed.
- Make provisions for your funeral in your will; remember that your requests must be in agreement with your parish priest and the Church. Only approved Sacred Scripture readings and approved sacred music is used. Music at the Mass is provided by the Parish through the Music Director and Organist. Other musicians may provide services at the Vigil or cemetery with permission of the parish priest. Eulogies are not given at the Mass but can be given at the Vigil or the Committal. See above about the Rites.
- Contact a funeral home to make pre-arrangements.
- Purchase a burial site.

Related questions:

- **What about Cremation?**
 - Cremation is not the norm in the Catholic Church. The norm is to prepare the body and have the full body present for all the Funeral Rites and then to bury or entomb the body. “The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in those rites.
“The Church’s teaching in regard to the human body as well as the Church’s preference for the burial of the body should be a regular part of catechesis on all levels, and pastors should make particular efforts to preserve this important teaching” (OCF, 413-414).
 - What are the reasons?
 1. The Lord Himself willed to be buried. “... (the funeral) should be carried out in a way...that clearly expresses the Church’s preference for the custom of burying the dead, after the example of Christ’s own will to be buried.” (OCF 415)
 2. On a natural level the presence of the body expresses the manner in which we had been accustomed to relate to the person. (OCF)
 3. Values on the supernatural level are affirmed. It teaches the supernatural dignity and destiny of the human body. “The body of a deceased brings forcefully to mind the church’s conviction that the human body is in Christ a temple of the Holy Spirit and is destined for future glory at the resurrection of the dead. This conviction in faith finds its expression in a sustained and insistent prayer that commends the deceased person to God’s merciful care so that his or her place in the communion of the just may be assured.” (OCF)
 - Modest funeral expenses are involved and there are many options of in-ground vaults or above-ground vaults. We should provide for this worthy expense in honor of the creation of God we were. Much money is spent during our lives on so many other matters and we should make provision for our full body burial. Sometimes this method is not much more than cremation services.

- What would be a reason for cremations? When extraordinary circumstance make the cremation of a body the only feasible choice.” For example, an infection by a fatal communicable disease or deadly bacterial agent which does not die with the death of the person; this would prevent the outbreak of an epidemic.
 - If for some good reason a person is to be cremated, the Church asks us to do this after the Mass of Christian Burial. This means that an inexpensive casket must be purchased or rented from the funeral home.
 - After cremation the cremated remains are to be placed in a **worthy vessel** (not a simple box) and must be buried in a cemetery in marked grave with the Rite of Committal.
 - You will need the services of a funeral home to deliver the remains to the Church and give service at the Church as in any funeral Mass and at the cemetery. We do not have funerals without a funeral director.
 - **The remains are never to be kept in anyone’s home, divided among family members, made into jewelry or scattered in any way or anywhere. We will not have a funeral at St. Michael’s unless we have written notice from the funeral director and/or cemetery where the remains are to be interred if they are to be interred in another place at a later date.**
- **May we have the wake at the Church?** No. We do not have resources for this. Neither do we have the resources to receive or care for the remains of the deceased over night.
 - **Reception at the home or the Parish Hall?** Our Bereavement Committee likes to offer refreshments after Rite of Committal. If you wish we can arrange for this time of visiting with your family and friends in our Parish Hall after we return from the cemetery. Or we can deliver a refreshment tray to your home.
 - **What about Holy Masses celebrated for the deceased?** It is normal to have a Mass offered as soon as possible for the deceased. Most people leave provision for this in their wills. When possible the “month’s mind”, a Mass on the one month anniversary and then on other anniversaries is a good practice. If Masses are not available on those days in your parish, your parish priest may be able to send them to be offered in the Missions. Pray regularly for the faithful departed, especially on November 2 – All Souls Day.
 - **May a non- Catholic have a Catholic funeral?** Yes, if the person had no objections and the family desires a Mass of Christian Burial and there is no impediment.
 - **What are the fees for the Priest and the Church?** There are no fees for our parish family members. If you wish to give a gift that is your option. The musicians are a part of our parish resources and are funded by the offertory donations in our stewardship of our treasures.
 - **What about flowers?** One basket of flowers may be placed before the Altar or Ambo. The other flowers from the funeral home should not be brought to the Church.
 - **What about pictures?** You may place pictures on a table or easel in the Social Hall. This is often very helpful in the grieving process.
 - **Who provides Holy Cards?** Normally, the funeral home has a service for this. There are religious stores who do this likewise. Be sure that the back of the Card has the proper language. “Mass of Christian Burial” and then the date is correct. “Fortified with the Last Sacraments” is good to include. There are several prayers you could use. It is good to place the baptismal date on the card if there is room.
 - **Why is it important to have a grave?** Our cemeteries are places of great sign value as were the catacombs of old. The grave and the marker are visible signs that a person did live and that it mattered that he or she lived. Years from now someone will walk by our graves and remember us and that it was important that we lived and died. Cemeteries are places of catechesis about death and they are places of prayer in the context of the communion of saints and our waiting for the final coming of the Lord.
 - **What about organ donations?** A Catholic may donate body organs after death actually occurs; if it is a twinned organ and the other one is functioning it can be donated before death.

- **Can I donate my body to a university?** Yes. But you must be sure that the body will be buried properly when the experimentations are completed. In this case you should have Holy Mass offered for the deceased.
- **What about miscarried or stillborn babies?** Depending on the possibility of your collecting the remains, the baby should be named, baptized and buried. If you are in a hospital, the remains of the baby will be sent to the pathologist. You should request that you receive the remains. Most hospitals have little caskets which they offer you. If the baby is more developed we may need to obtain a larger casket from a funeral director. We should have a Mass of Christian burial and bury the baby appropriately and in a marked grave.
- **What about remembering the Church in my Will?** Yes, all Catholics should do this. Estate planning is a part of our good stewardship of the resources God has shared with us. You can use the many ways of Estate planning to assist the proclamation of the Gospel through your parish and diocese. Our parish can receive funds in a variety of fashions through annuities, and so forth, as well as direct gifts to the parish or to the St. Michael's Endowment Fund. Ask the Pastor about this. Also, if for some reason you choose to ask people to make donations in lieu of flowers, remember that they can leave gifts to your parish in your memory