

# Catholic Funerals

*in the Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth*

## Catholic Funerals: Theological and Pastoral Considerations

### Points of interest:

#### I. The ministry of consolation at the moment of death

#### II. Liturgical celebration of a Christian funeral

#### III. Other Practical Orientations

*«I am the resurrection and the life»*, Jesus said to Martha who was weeping over the dead body of her brother Lazarus, and he added: *«if anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die»* (Jn 11:24-25). Jesus reaffirmed that promise a few other times in his conversations with his apostles: *«I tell you most solemnly, the hour will come – and in fact it is here already- when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and all who hear it will live... the dead will leave their graves at the sound of his voice...»* (Jn 5: 28). On another occasion he declared: *«I am going now to prepare a place for you, and [...] I shall return to take you with me»* (Jn 14:3); *«Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they may always see the glory you ave given me before the foundation of the world»* (Jn 17:24). Finally, about to die on the cross Jesus turned to the thief who was praying for mercy: *«I promise you, today you will be with me in paradise»* (Lk 23:43). Jesus clearly leaves no doubt about his role as Redeemer.



**O**ur Christian understanding of life and death has always been rooted in those words of the Lord which invite us to look on the reality of death in the light of an ongoing flow of life which, at the moment of death, is being transformed, not destroyed. Faced with the death of a loved one, we draw from Christ's own death and resurrection the hope that we shall also rise from death and live on eternally. As Saint Paul puts it, *«since we have become one with him in dying as he did, we shall rise with him»* (Rm 6:3-5). That gift of faith in Christ's promises constantly challenges us to go deeper in our understanding of our earthly journey so as to experience a real encounter with Him who has gone before us to open up the way to eternal life.



Our rootedness in Christ's promises must hence shape and empower our faith and that of the Church in all of its pastoral activity. (*Order of Christian Funerals, # 1& 2 – henceforth referred to as OCF*). Faith and hope in our own resurrection are to be focal points in the way we celebrate the passing of a person from this life to the next. We celebrate with respect the earthly journey of someone who has been created in God's image, has been baptized and redeemed through Christ's death and resurrection, and who now has reached the promised destination, not the terminal point of one's existence.

In her pastoral solicitude, the Church as faith community is empowered by this belief which must impact the manner in which we deal with life, death, and the sorrow of those who are directly affected by the loss of a family member or a close friend. Our role as believers in Christ must differ from a purely secular approach or direction since we act as witnesses of the community's faith in the resurrection. Our rituals must hence reflect the grace of baptism, the gift of the Eucharist, the forgiveness of sins and those other spiritual gifts that have nourished and sustained the faith life of the deceased person (*OCF, # 4 & 5*).



The Church exercises that ministry especially through her funeral rituals by welcoming the remains of the departed one; she professes her belief in the new life stage that a person has reached; she asks God to welcome that person and she commits his or her whole life journey to his loving mercy. Through this ministry of consolation, as through its presence and prayers, the faith community accompanies the family and friends with compassion, and in so doing witnesses to a true Christian hope in the resurrection of the one who has gone from this life (*OCF, # 6*).

Today's society, however, is undergoing radical changes in the way it deals with the reality of dying, such that, at the death of a family member or friend, a whole range of options are offered to those left behind, ranging from Christian funerals to immediate disposal of the body with nothing else sometimes. Moreover, it even occurs that when a funeral service is being asked of the Church, ministers are at times faced with expectations and requests which hardly reflect the faith we profess as Christians.

Considering this new social context where, in many instances, people do not understand life and death the way Christians do, but still ask for a traditional funeral or some kind of prayer celebration at church or in another place; considering also the role of the Christian community at large and the increasing number of funerals at this time, I have thought it necessary to issue some orientations regarding the celebration of funerals in our Church, and at the same time emphasize the Christian meaning of life and death in our prayer, liturgical celebrations and actions.

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***“The Easter candle reminds the faithful of Christ’s undying presence among them, of his victory over sin and death, and of their share in that victory by virtue of their [Baptism].”***

*(OCF, General Introduction, # 35)*

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## Archdiocesan Guidelines:

### ***I. The ministry of consolation at the moment of death***

#### **Is it important to establish a pastoral team to provide an adequate ministry of consolation?**

1. Since funerals are an integral part of the entire pastoral ministry in a parish, it would be helpful to have in each parish – or a group of parishes - a team ready to take on the coordination and responsibility of the pastoral care and actions necessary and appropriate at the time of a person's death and in the preparation of the funeral which would constitute an adequate ministry of consolation.
2. Such a team would be appointed by the Pastor of a parish after consulting with the Parish's Pastoral Council. The ministry team would attend to various needs arising from a death in the parish like, for instance: prayers at the time of death, visiting or welcoming the family, preparing a celebration or prayer vigil which might take place at the funeral home, preparing the funeral liturgy, prayers at the cemetery, and post-funeral visits to the family when appropriate or needed.
3. The persons chosen for this ministry should be capable of compassionate listening, of presenting tactfully the different options the parish can provide, be prepared to give respectful explanations of what Christian funerals are meant to accomplish, including some of the Church's basic teaching and requirements for Christian funerals.
4. All team members will require suitable preparation, including understanding of the liturgical rituals, the practices in the parish, relationship with the funeral home, and helpful ways to relate to people in the various stages of grief. (This will require a training program)

#### **What is the role of the team?**

5. In preparing the funeral rites, the team should inform the people concerned about the usual practice in the parish, provide suitable guidance for the selection of readings, prayers of the faithful, as well as appropriate selections of music and singing. Care should be taken to do this tactfully, with the intention of helping people to understand the deep meaning of Christian funerals as well as some essential Church requirements that reflect the faith dimension of this

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***Each Christian shares in [the ministry of consolation] according to the various gifts and offices in the Church.***

(OCF, General Introduction, # 9)

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#### **I. The ministry of consolation at the moment of death**

- Is it important to establish a pastoral team to provide an adequate ministry of consolation? **P-3**
- What is the role of the team? **P-3**



important moment in people's lives. Whenever possible, it is important to provide the family with opportunities to participate in the rites if they so wish.

6. Members of the Pastoral Team who will be called upon to lead prayers at the funeral home must prepare well for this ministry of consolation. The vigil or wake service may include: prayers, shared memories of the person's life, songs, etc. Careful attention will be given to maintain a pastoral atmosphere during the last moments of prayer at the funeral home, especially when the casket is being closed and the face of the dear one is removed from view. One member of the team can remain discreetly close to the grieving people and bring compassionate support.
7. At the burial, it is most appropriate that the acting minister or a member of the team be with the family and those attending. When an ordained minister cannot be present, a team member will lead the prayers of committal.
8. It is customary, after the funeral and burial, to have a reception for those attending the celebration. This provides an opportunity for relatives and friends to express their sympathy and to thank whoever has brought comfort and help during those difficult days and to share one's feelings as well.
9. Whenever possible or appropriate, in the weeks following the funeral, a member of the Pastoral Team could visit the family to express compassion on behalf of the community and assure of its ongoing prayer and support.



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***“...it is right to show respect for the bodies of the faithful departed, which in life were the temple of the Holy spirit.”***

*(OCF, Introduction, # 3)*

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## II. Liturgical celebration of a Christian funeral

*The celebration of the Christian funeral brings hope and consolation to the living. While proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and witnessing to Christian hope in the resurrection, the funeral rites also recall to all who take part in them God's mercy and judgment and meet the human need to turn always to God in times of crisis. "If one member suffers in the body of Christ which is the Church, all the members suffer with that member" (I Cor. 12:26).*

*(OCF, General Introduction, # 7-8)*

### What is the spirit that should mark a funeral liturgy?

10. Funerals are the last stage in the earthly pilgrimage of a person. Considering the pain often experienced by those who have lost a dear one, this celebration is most significant and calls for a well planned liturgy which generally leaves a long lasting memory in the mind of those attending. This is why all who perform some ministry must remember that any seemingly inappropriate speech or gesture leaves a long lasting pain behind it. All who fulfill a ministry or a ritual action in the celebration need to be well prepared so they will do what they have to do with dignity. The entire Christian community itself must be mindful of the necessary dignity and decorum needed during the funeral rite. Actions should unfold with meaning, whether it be carrying the processional cross, placing the paschal candle respectfully where it should be, incensing the body or the cremated remains and sprinkling holy water: all of which actions are allowed in our Archdiocese.



### Disposal of cremated remains

11. Early Christians did not use cremation, but they buried their dead with honour following the Jewish tradition. Cremation as such was not incompatible with Christian teaching, but it was the motives that were suspect or considered "pagan". With time, however, the Church lifted the ban on this practice, unless it is still chosen for reasons contrary to Christian teaching (*canon 1176 § 3*).
12. Due to the great respect the Church has for the dignity, unity and sacredness of the person whose remains recall the life of a baptized

### II. Liturgical celebration of a Christian funeral

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child of God, she holds it important to maintain the same respect and care for cremated remains as for the body of the deceased (*Liturgical Norms on Cremation, Congregation for Divine Worship: Order of Christian Funerals, Appendix 2 "Cremation" No. 417*). The Catholic funeral rites express that reverence and so must the burial, including burial of cremated remains. That is why the Church demands that they be kept undivided and that the container be buried in the cemetery or placed in a mausoleum or a columbarium designated for that purpose instead of having them scattered or kept in a private home. Scattering human remains or keeping them at home shows a tendency to look backward at a life that has passed rather than to look forward to the new stage of life with God that has been reached, which is, the life of the resurrection with Christ.

13. The National Liturgy Office of the CCCB has published in 2006 a leaflet entitled CATHOLICS AND CREMATION which addresses various questions about this reality and is still very timely. It could be put at the disposal of parishioners. [www.nlo.cccb.ca](http://www.nlo.cccb.ca)

### **Should the funeral liturgy be celebrated as a Funeral Mass or a funeral Liturgy outside Mass?**

14. Funerals are generally well attended, but many of the people who come to our Church for this purpose - including family members more often now - do not belong to our Catholic tradition. Even among Catholics, many have not kept a meaningful connection with their Christian faith, especially with the Eucharistic celebration or with the faith community itself. This means that many may not understand our liturgical rites, or don't know how they can participate appropriately. Such circumstances place everyone, especially priests, in an uncomfortable and sometimes impossible position during the Eucharist, more particularly at the time of communion. Regrettable situations are being experienced and reported more often now, and we can expect such a reality to become more prevalent in the future. We must therefore address it now, in the spirit of responsible hospitality and respect for everyone.
15. Moreover, due to an aging population in many of our parishes, the number of funerals is also increasing. Our priests themselves are aging, and the responsibility of attending to the needs of their parishioners can become a heavy burden. Some priests who presently serve several communities have funerals almost every weekday, and they must travel significant distances in order to provide this ministry. This is a pressing matter requiring immediate attention as well.

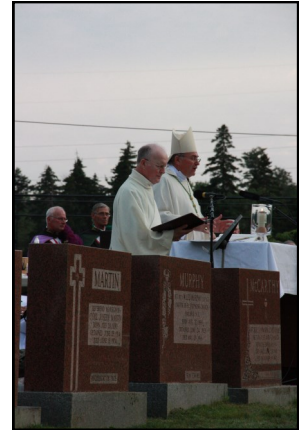
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***Because of the 1984 indult granted to the Church in Canada by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, the funeral liturgy, including the Eucharist, may be celebrated with the cremated remains of the deceased person present.***

*(Catholics and Cremation-CCCB Leaflet, 1998, 2003, 2006)*

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16. Considering that the funeral ritual is a liturgy that is complete in itself which has been distinct from the celebration of the Eucharist for several centuries following the early days of Christianity, as it is still the case in many countries and missions; considering also that the celebration of Mass was added later on, reflecting a society that generally identified itself as Catholic; it has now become necessary to distinguish once again between those two forms of funeral liturgies. Whenever the situation requires it and seems pastorally appropriate, the funeral rite should be a Liturgy of the Word as is provided for in the Ritual (*OCF*, # 45-46, # 348-376, # 488-511). This is already the form used when a deacon or layperson leads a funeral. The same form also applies during the days when the liturgical calendar does not permit a funeral Mass (*see # 33 in this document*).
17. In many cases, instead of speaking of a funeral “*with or without the Eucharist*” – an expression which might be understood as referring to the level or quality of the service, it should be the ordinary practice to propose the funeral rite which best meets the family’s current situation or spiritual context. This would better reflect and respect our Catholic faith and would enable people to feel more at ease in the present context which is increasingly secular. As a rule, it does not seem appropriate to celebrate a funeral Mass when, clearly, the majority of the people present are not in touch with our faith or not properly disposed to celebrate the Eucharist or to receive communion. It would be preferable in such circumstances to offer a funeral service in the form of a Liturgy of the Word. These matters should be addressed with the family of the deceased at an appropriate time, before the actual funeral takes place in the Church.



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***... it should be the ordinary practice to propose the funeral rite which best meets the family’s current situation or spiritual context.***

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### **Who can preside at the Funeral Liturgy?**

18. Funerals can be presided by a priest, a deacon or a mandated layperson in the absence of an ordained minister (*OCF*, # 14). In this last case, the person who has the required qualifications and dispositions becomes a member of the funeral team, when chosen by the Pastor, ideally upon the recommendation of the Pastoral Council and the members of this ministry of consolation. It is the Pastor himself, or in the case where parishes are entrusted to a lay Coordinator, by the priest responsible for the pastoral care of the area, or else the Episcopal Vicar of the region, who requests a mandate from the Bishop to designate someone to exercise this ministry in a specific community. In fact, many have already experienced the Liturgy of the Word when a deacon leads a funeral rite. At present, I think it is important for us to



move forward on this point now and to call on laypersons as representatives of the faith community to lead funeral rites.



19. It is recommended that the mandated lay minister, working with the pastor and the Parish Pastoral Team for this ministry, meet with the family or at least some members of the family before the funeral, to offer sympathy and to request appropriate information concerning the deceased person. Such an encounter will be a source of consolation and contribute to a better appreciation of the deceased person's life and highlight the Christian values which may be emphasized during the liturgical celebration.
20. At different moments of the celebration, the minister shall take care to express the community's sympathy and compassion for the grieving family/friends, and invite the people to place their trust in Christian hope as Christ has taught us to do (*Jn 11:25*).
21. If a family wishes to call on a priest or a deacon other than the local pastor to preside the funeral, the family must work this out with the pastor of the local parish and have his consent.



### **Should communion be offered at a funeral within a Liturgy of the Word?**

22. When the funeral takes the form of a Liturgy of the Word, there is no distribution of Holy Communion. Depending on circumstances, people can be invited to a memorial Mass which can be celebrated for the deceased person at a later date not too far removed from the day of the funeral. It will also be helpful to inform the family that the deceased person will be remembered by name in the prayers of the faithful at the next Sunday Mass.
23. Where it is appropriate, gestures of unity and solidarity with the family may be integrated into this celebration as, for instance: a gesture of peace, an invitation to close relatives or other significant members of the assembly to sprinkle holy water on the casket or urn in remembrance of the person's baptism, or make a sign of the cross on the casket or urn to recall our salvation through Christ's death and resurrection, provided one makes sure those gestures are understood and the mourners do not feel embarrassed or obligated to participate.

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***“...the faithful must be urged to recite the usual psalms and prayers themselves when there is no deacon or priest present.”***

*(OCF, Introduction, # 5)*

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### **What formation should the people exercising ministries at a funeral liturgy be given?**

24. Proclamation of the Word of God: the Church attaches great importance to the readings from the Word of God. Readers proclaim before the assembly the paschal mystery which is the core message of the funeral, they convey the hope of being gathered together in God's kingdom, and they encourage the witnessing of Christian life. More importantly, they remind us that suffering is not the end of all, but that full life in God is the next step reached following death (*OCF, # 22*).
25. Considering the importance of proclaiming the Word of God meaningfully at all times but in a special way at funerals, one should take care that the reader chosen has exercised this ministry before, or has received proper training for it, and can deliver an understandable message. The reader must be well informed of the unfolding of the celebration so as to know what to do and when to do it.
26. The biblical readings proposed for funerals cannot be replaced by nonbiblical readings during the Liturgy of funerals. But at other prayer services, nonbiblical readings may be used in addition to biblical readings. (*OCF, # 23*).

### **How should symbols, music and singing contribute to the funeral rite?**

27. Use of Christian symbols such as water, light, incense, a cross, the pall must be understood by the family and assembly. Ministers must make sure they are used in a meaningful manner so that they point out the Christian mysteries that they refer to, such as baptism, the forgiveness of sins, hope in the resurrection, prayer, etc. The Paschal Candle is placed prominently near the casket or urn during a funeral as a symbol of the resurrection (*OCF, # 35*).
28. Since the deceased person is most often a member of the community where the funeral takes place, priority should be given to the local singers and musicians who are familiar with the liturgical practices of that parish. When the family wishes to invite others for this ministry, the music director in the parish (if any) should be informed so a good collaboration can be achieved. Furthermore, any invitee should be made aware of the present diocesan orientations regarding liturgy and Christian funerals, as



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***“[The Scripture readings],  
proclaim the  
paschal mystery,  
they convey the  
hope of being  
gathered together  
again in God’s  
kingdom, they  
teach  
remembrance of  
the dead, and  
throughout they  
encourage the  
witness of a  
Christian life.”***

(OCF, Introduction, # 11)

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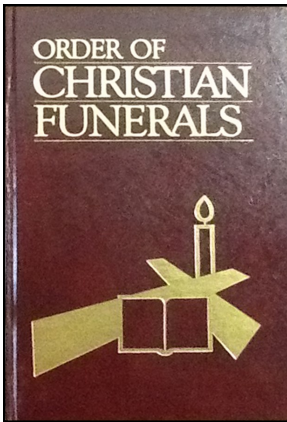
well as any specific or customary guidelines regarding music in that parish.

29. The selection of songs and music is to be prepared in conversation with the parish pastoral team and should reflect the fact that this is a community celebrating the faith of one of its members. Consequently, the music and liturgy reflect the Christian faith, nourish the gathered people's hope in the resurrection and foster peace. That is why it is not appropriate to use secular songs at funerals (*OCF*, # 30-31).

30. The psalm is an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word. That is why it is integrated into the Lectionary. It comes after the first reading, whether at Mass or at a Liturgy of the Word. It is meant to help people pray after having heard the Word of God. The *Lectionary for Christian Funerals* proposes several psalms. It is to be remembered that the psalm can never be replaced by another song (*Ordo 2007*, p.14), even a song to the Blessed Virgin Mary, nor can any other song that is a part of the funeral liturgy proper be replaced. However, if the family insists on having another song added to those prescribed, it may be placed at the very beginning as a meditation before the greeting to draw everyone into the spirit of prayer, or after the final commendation, just before the recessional procession.

31. The Alleluia is an acclamation introducing the Gospel, hence it must be sung at funerals, except during Lent where an acclamation to Christ is being sung.

32. The final commendation and farewell includes singing. This moment is often emotionally difficult for relatives and friends. It calls for respect and music that reflects faith and hope in God's welcoming mercy. There are many good hymns that convey those sentiments and help the family at this moment of definite separation from the bodily presence of the departed one.



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***“As they celebrate the funerals of their brothers and sisters, Christians should be intent on affirming their hope for eternal life.”***

*(OCF, Introduction, # 2)*

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### III. Other Practical Orientations

#### Are eulogies permitted at a funeral?

33. The homily is to be delivered by the priest, the deacon or a reflection by the mandated lay minister who leads the funeral service. In many instances, the homily/reflection will provide sufficient space to reflect on how the deceased person has integrated Gospel values in his/her faith journey. However, it is becoming more common for a close relative or friend to deliver a message of remembrance on that occasion. This practice is not recommended since the purpose of the funeral liturgy is not to express such message of praise for the deceased, but to proclaim the Christian message of hope in the resurrection.
34. If, for pastoral reasons, the minister thinks it is good to have some words of remembrance, the following guidelines are to be observed :
- there should be only one person speaking, for a few minutes only;
  - the appropriate time for a few words would be after the initial greeting of the mourners at the entrance of the church, or before the final committal; (The preferred place for the Words of Remembrance is at the reception if there is one or prior to the conclusion of the Vigil prayers.)
  - the text of any remarks is to be submitted to the minister for review before the day of the funeral, to allow time for modifications if necessary;
  - care must be taken that no inappropriate language or anecdotes are included, to preserve the spirit of Christian prayer in a liturgical setting focused on faith and hope in the resurrection.



#### Can a funeral service take place in a funeral parlour or non-church context?

35. The intention of the Church is that funerals are celebrated in a church. The liturgy is structured to unfold in the “house of the faith community” representing the place of baptism, the Eucharist, christian marriage and other communal prayers and celebrations. A family who prefers to have a funeral rite or some prayers for the deceased at a funeral home may be granted the request, but the form of this rite will be a Liturgy of the Word. Care should be taken to create the same prayerful atmosphere as for a funeral in the church. The Mass must not be celebrated in a funeral parlor.

#### III. Other Practical Orientations

- Are eulogies permitted at a funeral? **P.11**
- Can a funeral service take place in a funeral parlour or non-church context? **P.11**
- Can funerals be celebrated on Saturday afternoon or on Sundays? **P.12**

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***“The responsibility for the ministry of consolation rests with the believing community, which heeds the words and example of the Lord Jesus: “Blessed are they who mourn; they shall be consoled” Matthew 5:3)”***

*(OCF, General Introduction, # 9)*

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### **Can funerals be celebrated on Saturday afternoon or on Sundays?**

36. A funeral Mass on Saturday afternoon never replaces Sunday Mass. If there is a need to have a funeral on Saturday afternoon, it should be with a Liturgy of the Word.
37. It is not permitted to celebrate a funeral Mass on Sundays, on Christmas Day, January 1<sup>st</sup>, and from Holy Thursday until the conclusion of Easter Sunday.



Archdiocese of | Archidiocèse d'  
**Halifax-Yarmouth**

HALIFAX OFFICE:  
1531 Grafton Street  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
B3J 2B9  
(902) 429-9800

YARMOUTH OFFICE:  
#201, 65 Green Street  
Yarmouth, Nova Scotia  
B5A 1Z6  
(902) 742-7163

[www.halifaxyarmouth.org](http://www.halifaxyarmouth.org)