

Why plan a funeral?

The death of a family member is always a difficult time. Grief and the feeling of loss can overwhelm our emotions making funeral planning a challenging task. The loved ones of the deceased are often unaware of the benefits gained by the family through their participation in the funeral rites of the Catholic Church. An understanding of these rites will help us to appreciate their importance and fully benefit from their celebration.

The funeral rites of the Catholic Church are a great gift to both the living and deceased family members. The rituals take place in three stations or locations. Their purpose is twofold: to pray that God will bestow his great love and mercy upon our loved one and to help us walk through the stages of grief to the hope of resurrection and life in the world to come. These rites are designed to benefit both the deceased as well as their family. If we eliminate any of the three stations, we not only reduce the benefits to our loved one who has passed away but also to ourselves and our family and friends. Let us take a brief look at the three stations and their purpose.

The First Station, the Funeral Home

The first station has historically been the home but today, due to our burial practices, it usually takes place in the Funeral Home. In the past, the family gathered at home to clean and dress the body, preparing it for the visitation in the home. Today the preparation of the body is done by the Funeral Home and the visitation usually occurs there. The visitation usually ends with a liturgy called the Vigil service taking place the evening before the second station, the Funeral Mass.

The purpose of the Vigil is to “gently accompany the mourners in their initial adjustment to the fact of death and to the sorrow this entails.” This rite, “helps the mourners to express their sorrow and to find strength and consolation through faith in Christ and his Resurrection to eternal life. The members of the Christian community offer support to the mourners, especially by praying that the one they have lost may have eternal life.”

The Vigil celebrates the life of the deceased. Family members are encouraged to offer eulogies or brief words of remembrance. The general focus of the Vigil, through the words of Sacred Scripture, should always turn to God as “the source of faith and hope, as light and life in the face of darkness and death. Consoled by the redeeming word of God and by the abiding presence of Christ and his Spirit, the assembly at the Vigil calls upon the Father of mercy to receive the deceased into the kingdom of light and peace.”

The Second Station, the Funeral Mass

“Confident in Jesus’ presence among them in the living word, the living sacrifice, the living meal, those present in union with the whole Church offer prayers and petitions for the deceased, whom they entrust to God’s merciful love.”

The Funeral Mass provides a distinct transition between the first station, the Vigil service, which looks back at the life of the deceased, and the last station, the cemetery committal, which looks forward to the resurrection. When we celebrate the Mass, the entire worldwide Church, the Body of Christ, prays with us. The Funeral Mass, therefore, brings the entire Church into the liturgy, praying that God through his great love bestows His mercy upon the deceased. We should not underestimate the benefits of all these prayers upon the salvation of the soul of our deceased loved one. Also at Mass, our sorrows and pain are joined to those of Christ on the cross and offered to God the Father for the salvation of the world. The family members can find satisfaction and peace in knowing that their own sorrow and pain can have this positive effect upon the world.

In its transitional role, the Funeral Mass should not be blended into either the first station or the third station. The addition of words of remembrance by a family member or friend in the Funeral Mass represents such a blending and has the effect of diminishing its transitional role. Whenever possible, this should be avoided during the Funeral Mass but may take place at the first station.

Order of the Catholic Funeral Rites

Vigil Service → Funeral Mass → Rite of Committal

Grief

Support

Hope

The Third Station, the Cemetery Committal

The last station “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.” “In committing the body to its resting place, the community expresses the hope that, with all those who have gone before marked with the sign of faith, the deceased awaits the glory of the resurrection.”

This station is “the final act of the community of faith in caring for the body of the deceased” and marks the period of anticipation, awaiting the glory of the resurrection of our loved one. The ritual looks forward with hope to the time when we are reunited with our loved ones. It is the shortest of the three rituals but is filled with the most joy. The station takes place at the cemetery where the ground may or may not be blessed. If the burial is not in a Catholic cemetery there are specific texts to bless the ground.

Funeral Notes:

Special Requests:

Music and the selection of hymns

Frequently it is the desire of either the deceased or family members to use a favorite piece of music or hymn within the Funeral Mass. Please understand that the primary focus of the Mass is always the worship of God the Father through His Son, Jesus Christ, therefore music at the Funeral Mass should always be of a liturgical nature rather than of secular origin. Hymns and songs are taken from the Hymnal of the Diocese of Marquette. Non-liturgical music, at the discretion of the pastor, may be played at the Vigil service.

The way forward

The Catholic Church highly recommends that all three stations be celebrated for any Catholic funeral. As you can now see, the rituals at these three stations, moves us through a process of remembering the deeds of the deceased, transitioning through the prayers of the Church and finally to the burial where we wait with hope to be reunited with our loved ones in the glory of the resurrection to come.

The rituals of the Church at these three stations walk with us through our sorrow and grief into the healing arms of our loving Savior, Jesus Christ. It is the Church’s desire that we emerge from these rituals, not filled with sorrow and grief but with joy and peace, in the hope of life eternal.

The quoted text comes from the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, **Order of Christian Funerals**, Liturgy Training Publications, Chicago, IL, 2018.

For specific planning information, please contact your local parish or funeral director. They can be reached at:



Funeral Planning and the Three Stations

A journey through grief to
the glory of the resurrection
and life eternal.

(An explanation of the funeral rites of the Catholic Church)



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