



***Praying for the Dead, Caring for the Living***

Celebration of Funerals in the Diocese of Kerry



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### ***Dying***

Death comes in many varied ways. It may be the natural end of a long life or expected due to illness. Sometimes it may be unexpected, as a result of an accident, miscarriage, suicide or fatal health condition. Whenever death occurs, it shocks us. It takes time for the reality of someone's death to sink in.

We know the challenges and riches of Christian living, but Christian dying and death can bring its own turmoil, along with its own blessings. There may be time to reflect on one's life, giving thanks for all that has been received and asking for the Lord's mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. There may be an opportunity to invite the Lord Jesus to journey with them in their illness through the Sacrament of Anointing the Sick, or, near death, to receive Viaticum - Holy Communion as food for the journey through death to the fullness of eternal life. The dying person may also talk with loved ones and family about their funeral and where they wish to be buried, and may explore such things as appropriate scripture passages and liturgical music for their funeral. Where death is expected, the dying person may have the opportunity to attend to things that were perhaps postponed - creating the time with loved ones to say all that had been left unsaid, making a will, and maybe giving consent to organ donation. The family, and all who are sharing in the ministry of comfort to the dying person, journey with the person to support them during this time.

### ***Death***

*"The time immediately following death is often one of bewilderment and may involve shock or heart-rending grief for the family and close friends"*  
(Order of Christian Funerals 49).

As a Christian community, and in a particular way, in the local parish, we reach out to support and pray with those bereaved in their pain of letting go. We join the family and friends in entrusting the deceased person to God, our Creator and our Saviour.

The grieving family will remember the deceased person in many personal ways, such as looking through photographs, watching a family video, recalling the memories, shedding quiet tears, and praying their own prayers in the powerful voice of silence.

There is also the communal aspect of grief, where the person's death is marked in public ways - writing an obituary, postponing events, closing a business as a public mark of respect, the gathering of neighbours around the family, and ultimately in the worshipping community gathering to celebrate the funeral liturgies.

### ***Local Customs***

In Ireland and in our diocese, we are blessed with many local customs that show the support of the local community for the family, and the respect that is due to those who have died. We are aware of the effort people make to join the family for the funeral, sometimes travelling long journeys to be supportive, in presence

as well as in prayer. We think also of the simple custom of traffic pausing as a funeral approaches, people standing out of their vehicles, even walking a few footsteps of prayerful solidarity, *Coiscéim na Trócaire*. There is a custom of neighbours preparing food and helping to welcome visitors to the house, and of neighbours digging or filling in the grave (as they worked alongside them in life, they work to assist them in death).

Newer customs have developed in recent years, such as floral tributes and wreaths for the grave, donations to charity and gathering for a meal after the Requiem Mass or Service. Some families wish to include appropriate personal mementoes, representing different aspects of the person's life, and these are brought to the sanctuary at the beginning of the Mass. Each funeral Mass celebrates the life of a particular person, with his or her own story and qualities. It is great if these sentiments are shared with the celebrant so that he might include them in the homily. Occasionally a family member may say a few words in the funeral home, at the beginning of the funeral Mass or at the graveside. This is all discussed with the priest in the preparation for the funeral.

At the time of death, we also want to be aware of all those who were part of the deceased person's life journey - the close family and friends, those who called and ministered to the person, the healthcare profession and possibly the emergency services. There is also the awareness of the place of God in our lives and in the life of this deceased person. This is seen during the days of the funeral where the family and community gather at various times to celebrate the person's life, to worship God and make their prayer of thanks for the gift of the life of the one who has died, and for the gift of the fullness of eternal life.



### ***The Prayer Journey of the Funeral***

During these days, there are quiet private times, and also more public times for the grieving family. The days of the funeral are punctuated by a number of prayer moments for the family and the community: Prayer at the Place of Death, Prayer at the Wake, the Service of the Reception of the Body at the Church, the Requiem Mass or Funeral Service and the Prayer at the Cemetery. Essentially it is a journey, accompanying the body from the place of death to the place of rest.

But for the one who has died, it is acknowledging their going from their place within the Christian community on earth, to their place with the Lord and the community of heaven.

As close family and friends grieve, the local parish community can be an immense support by journeying with them during these days. As is most often the case, the local priest is a major point of contact for the family in organising the funeral in the parish, and oftentimes presiding at the funeral Mass. The priest can be of huge help to the family in suggesting appropriate scripture readings, intercessions and music. The priest may also be of assistance in leading prayers at the place of death or at a wake, or he may be able to provide suggestions that would help a family member to lead such prayers. The priest can be of practical help to the family during the days of the funeral, though this is but one example of his ministry to the family. Visiting the family, offering a listening ear, chatting about the deceased person, joining with the family for a quiet prayer - these highlight some of the more private aspects of the priest's ministry to those who are grieving.

The supportive parish also includes neighbours, the funeral director, and the various parishioners who enrich the prayer times in the church. Within parishes, there are ministers of the Word, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, ministers of music, sacristans and the altar society, as well as the healthcare profession. In the future, parishioners may take on additional ministries in the celebration of the funeral rites.

The prayer journey of the funeral is to pray for the deceased, and to comfort and support the bereaved in their grief. It is a journey shared by all the parish community who offer their support through their presence and through using their gifts and ministries at this time. Together we offer praise to God for this person's life, and ask the Lord to welcome the deceased person into the fullness of eternal life.

### **Celebrating a Christian Funeral**

The funeral marks a stage in the final journey for the family and community, of letting go of their deceased loved one. The funeral liturgy of these days places the deceased person's life and death in the context of Christ's life, death and resurrection. It is Christ's life, death and resurrection that offer meaning to our lives and even though our belief may be shaken at this time, as Christians, we profess that it is our connection with Jesus Christ that offers meaning to our living.

The context of the liturgies these days is one of hope, in which we pray for the one who has died, entrusting them to God. We pray also for the consolation of all who mourn. The rituals of these days can offer an anchor to the bereaved because of their repetition and familiarity. However, we must also be aware that for the family of the deceased person, this may be their first time to be involved in such an intimate way with the ritual of the Christian funeral, and they may need guidance.

By the nature of the Church's funeral rites, they are public and have certain formalities, traditions and customs. The prayer and ritual of the Christian funeral are approached as one prayer, like a procession that moves from the deathbed to the cemetery. Within this procession, there are three specific moments that the Christian community marks:

- I. Reception of the Body at the Church
- II. The Funeral Mass and Final Commendation
- III. Rite of Committal

## **I Reception of the Body at the Church**

The parish community seeks to comfort and support those bereaved at this time, as they move from the privacy of their grief to the public celebration of their loved one's funeral. The reception of the body at the church is the first stage of the public rite of the Christian community. It is general practice that this takes place on the evening before the funeral Mass. This allows the parting from family and friends to take place in stages. Since the church is where the community of faith comes to worship, the Rite of Reception of the Body takes place at the church.

The entrance procession led by the minister, the coffin and the chief mourners may be accompanied by music or song, which helps to gather this community as one, in their grief, and in their hope of resurrection.

- In baptism, this person was presented to the community and **welcomed at the door of the church**. Now the family and all who accompany the body of the deceased person are greeted at the door of the church.
- In baptism, this person was washed clean in the saving waters. Now the body of the deceased is sprinkled with **holy water**.
- The **Paschal Candle**, the Easter candle, is lighting to remind us that we are in the presence of the Risen Christ. We, who have died with him in baptism, will come to the fullness of eternal life with him.

The coffin is placed near the altar. This reflects the importance of the one who has died to the gathered Christian community, the assembly. We have come to commend them, to entrust them to our God. As clothed in white on the day of their baptism, now **the pall**, a white cloth, covers the coffin. This is used in many parishes and it reminds us that we are all equal in the sight of God and enfolded in his mercy. We place on the coffin, symbols of our hope:

- **A cross**, reminder of Christ's victory over death.
- A Book of the *Gospels* or a **Bible**, the Word of God, reminder of God's faithfulness to his people.

During this liturgy, we hear God's Word as an invitation to recall again our belief in Christ's victory over death, and in being gathered after death into the fullness of God's kingdom. God's word is central to our prayer at this time... it holds us, the community, in remembrance of what we believe about life and about death. Then, the homily and the prayer of intercession put into words our hopes for our loved one and the needs of the bereaved and the community. Traditionally, we conclude this liturgy with a decade of the rosary, usually the first *Glorious Mystery*, the Resurrection.



## II The Funeral Mass and Final Commendation

The Funeral Mass is the central liturgical celebration for the deceased. The community gathers together to celebrate the life and death of one of its members. By coming together, they proclaim by their presence and by their actions, in word and in symbol, their central belief in the resurrection of the dead. It is by celebrating Christ's life, death and resurrection in the Eucharist that the Christian community affirm their hope for all who have been baptised with Christ.

For this reason, they gather to be fed. At the **table of the Word**, they are fed by the presence of Christ in his Word and the hope his call holds. At the **table of the Eucharist**, they share in his sacrifice, so to share in his victory over death. We are fed by God also, through the compassion and hope of the people gathered with us, and, by the homilist reflecting on the readings and offering consolation and strength.

At the end of the Mass, the **rite of final commendation and farewell** is celebrated. The pall, the cross and the Bible, or book of the *Gospels* are removed and the coffin is sprinkled with holy water. Through the sprinkling, we recall that in baptism each of us was marked for the fullness of eternal life. Then the coffin is incensed, reminding us that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. The song of farewell and the prayer of commendation affirm our hope and trust in God. The community calls on God and commends the deceased person to God. At the end of the funeral liturgy, the family and friends, and the Christian community journey with their loved one to the place of committal, the place of burial.

It should be noted that from Good Friday until after the Easter Vigil, since we do not celebrate Mass, a liturgy of the Word and Final Commendation is celebrated. There may be other occasions, when for pastoral reasons, such a liturgy may be more appropriate.



### **III The Rite of Committal**

This is the final farewell by the family and community, whom they entrust to the tender and merciful embrace of God. The care taken to prepare the body of the deceased for burial reflects our Christian belief in the fullness of eternal life and the resurrection of the body. The prayers and gestures of the funeral rites also affirm the Church's reverence for the body. Normally celebrated at the grave, this is the conclusion of the funeral rites. The community acknowledges the reality of separation and commends the deceased to God.

While burial is more common in Ireland, the practice of cremation is accepted by the Catholic Church. If the body of the deceased person is to be cremated, the rite of committal takes place at the burial of ashes. We honour them as we honoured the body. They are reverently buried or entombed in a place reserved for the burial of the dead, as soon after cremation as possible.

### **Funeral Directors**

The role of the funeral director in dealing with a family at the time of a family death is crucial. Very often, they are the first contact in arranging the funeral after the death of a loved one. Their role is essential in all the practical help and advice that they provide but more so, in the manner that they provide it. Their understanding, sensitivity and kindness are a valued service in all our communities at the time of death. Their sense of comfort and consolation reflects the support of the community and the consolation of God our loving Father. The funeral director journeys with the family at this sad and difficult time. While it is a professional role, it is also a privileged role, in helping the bereaved on the final journey of their loved one.

### **Care for the Family**

At the time of a funeral there is often outstanding support offered to the close family and friends of the person who has died. However, it is always the hope of the Christian community that this support continues. The journey of grief can have many difficult moments in the weeks and months ahead. With this in mind, the parish community gather again and again with the family: in celebrating the month's mind, at anniversaries, or cemetery gatherings. There is also the encouragement and concern shown by all who visit, support and care for those who are grieving and by various bereavement support groups.

## **Appendix : For ministers and parish liturgy groups**

### ***Ministry of Consolation for the mourners and the deceased***

The Christian community is called to support and console those who have been bereaved. This takes very different forms.... visiting the home of those bereaved and helping out in various ways with the ordinary tasks of daily living. In a particular way, the community is called upon to do for the family and friends of the bereaved what perhaps they cannot do for themselves at this time. As they grieve and cope with their loss, the parish community minister to them.

- *How do we as a parish community care for those who are bereaved? ... during the days of the funeral? .....as the weeks progress?*
- *Do we expect the family to minister to us in the funeral rites? Should it not be us who minister to them at this time?*
- *What burden might ministering to us place on a family especially for those who do not frequently attend Church?*
- *Have we ever thought of being available as ministers of the Word, and of Holy Communion, servers, choir.... as ways of supporting the family during this time?*

### ***Ministry of the Priest at the time of the funeral***

The ministry of the priest at the time of the funeral highlights another aspect of the parish community's support for the family. This ministry involves spending time with the family in empathy and support, but also assisting the family in preparing for the funeral, leading times of prayer, and presiding at the funeral Mass.

- *As a priest, how can I enhance the way I minister, during funeral times and afterwards?*
- *Do our parish structures enable our priest to spend time with those who are bereaved? What tasks can be taken on by others, in order to give our priest this time?*
- *Is the parish equipped with resources to help the priest in this ministry e.g. books of prayers so that family members can lead a rosary or times of prayer?*
- *Is there amplification in the cemetery that would assist the priest in his ministry at that time?*
- *If a priest is not available or is engaged in other ministry (e.g. the funeral of another person), is it possible to have another person/people trained and prepared to minister to the family, assist the family in preparing for the funeral, and leading some of the times of prayer?*

## *Liturgical Elements*

### **The Word of God**

The Word of God offers life and hope to people at all stages of life. A careful selection of the Sacred Scripture provided for funerals will give the family and community an opportunity to hear God speak to them in their needs, sorrows, fears and hopes. The readings tell of God's plan for a world in which suffering and death will relinquish their hold on all whom God has called his own.

- *As a parish, who is charged with advising the bereaved in the selection of scripture provided in the lectionary?*
- *Have we ever thought of having a booklet containing the scripture readings and responsorial psalms for funeral liturgies?*
- *If we train those who proclaim the Word of God on Sundays, how comfortable are we with expecting untrained people to do it on a day when they may be overcome with grief? How fair is this?*
- *How can we enable family members to participate in the Word of God, if there are not Ministers of the Word?*
- *Looking at the place of the Word of God in the various stages of the funeral liturgy, why is it not appropriate to use non-Biblical/other readings?*

### **Homily**

Each funeral homily is unique as it deals with God's grace and the life of a unique human person. Two of the pitfalls for the homilist can be to be either too general or too particular. The homily proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ, with special emphasis on his death and resurrection. This is our reason for hope, in the face of the death of a loved family member or friend.

- *How do we support those who will homilise at a funeral? .... giving them space and time to prepare, taking from them some of the tasks that can be done by others...affirming the priests when their words have been a source of consolation and hope?*
- *Is it possible to incorporate a family's memories of their loved one in the homily?*
- *How can the homily include a sense of gratitude for the life of the one who has died?*
- *Does the homily exclude the felt need for a eulogy?*
- *If a family request a eulogy, when is the most appropriate time and place for it?*

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

In the prayer of the faithful, the Christian community calls upon God to bring comfort to the bereaved and to show mercy to the deceased. Several models of intercessions are provided within the rites. Family members or friends might wish to adapt these prayers to relate to their particular needs.

- *How do we as a parish enable the bereaved to offer their prayers of intercession at this time?*
- *Would it be possible to have the various models of intercessions available to people?*
- *Why is it not appropriate that the prayers relate solely to the bereaved family and to the deceased?*
- *Does our parish practice of prayer of the faithful on Sunday help parishioners to understand that these prayers are offered on behalf of the whole Christian community?*

## **Presentation of the Gifts**

At the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the gifts, which will become the Lord's body and blood, are brought to the altar. The bread and wine are offered to God. They are transformed in our presence and become the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

- *How do we present the gifts of bread and wine in our parish?*
- *Is this a practice everyday, on Sundays or only at weddings and funerals?*
- *As the gifts presented during the Eucharistic Prayers are gifts given to God, why is it not appropriate to present the symbols of the person at this time?*
- *What is the significance of these symbols of the person?*
- *When might it be appropriate to have presentation of these symbols?*

## **Music**

It might be good to remind ourselves that singing plays an integral role in the liturgy, and that the most important singing is that which is done by the whole assembly. (Choirs, soloists and instrumentalists play an important, but secondary role. This of course may not be our experience in reality.) When as a community we sing, we express something of our faith, and in doing so, strengthen and nourish it. Singing as a community binds people, and what we sing expresses something of our

relationship with God. It also tells us something of the particular celebration in which we participate. It is primarily active, participated in, and alive! It is secondarily reflective and listened to! It is never entertainment!

The basic model for all our liturgy is the Sunday Mass, and how we celebrate, gather, read, sing and pray on a Sunday will be reflected in all other liturgies. In the light of the above, regarding music and song in the liturgy of your parish;

- *Is singing understood to be the job of the entire congregation? Or is singing the domain of the few, (choir, cantor, and soloist)?*
- *How might we do music / song at funerals in a more participative way?*
- *How can parish hymnbooks be used at our funeral celebrations?*
- *Is our funeral music a dirge, or is it the hope filled song of a believing community?*
- *What place does non-liturgical music have in the liturgy?*

The funeral rites of the church offer without exception, the full dignity of the liturgy to all who believe. In life and death, we are all equal in the sight of God.

- *How might a parish reflect this dignity musically in the funeral liturgies of the parish? How does a 'brought-in' soloist or instrumentalist fit in with this understanding?*

### **Silence**

Silence is a natural response to the mystery of death and to the reality of great pain and loss for the bereaved. Prayerful silence at different moments of the funeral liturgies allow the people gathered to be present to what is happening in the liturgy, to reflect on God's word and to offer their own prayers for the deceased person and those bereaved.

- *What are the moments when the liturgy calls for silence? ..... e.g. after each of the readings, at the incensing of the coffin before the final commendation...*
- *How do we as a parish community allow for silence in our liturgical celebrations?*

## ***Symbols***

### **Paschal Candle [Easter Candle]**

The Paschal Candle is lit at the Easter Vigil, symbol of 'Christ our Light' present among us, and his victory over death. It is placed near the coffin during the funeral liturgies.

- *Is this candle large enough to be sufficiently different from your altar candles? (Remember what it symbolises!)*
- *What link is being made with baptism, when we use the Paschal Candle in the funeral rites?*
- *Is it actually the Paschal Candle?*
- *Is it appropriately located?*

### **Holy Water**

Holy water is used many times; gathering in the presence of the body, as the coffin is closed, at the Reception of the Body at the Church, during the Final Commendation and at the burial. The use of holy water calls to mind the links with the waters of Baptism, especially when the body is received at the Church. The symbolism is heightened if the water is taken from the baptismal font as the prayer is said, 'In the waters of baptism....' (Prayer for the Sprinkling with holy water)

- *How is the sprinkling with holy water done in our parish? Is it rushed? Is there a generous sprinkling?*
- *In your parish, or from your own experience, is the link between holy water and the waters of baptism obvious?*
- *Is the symbolism visible?*

### **Incense**

Incense is used during the funeral rite to honour the body of the deceased. In baptism, this person's body became a temple of the Holy Spirit. The incensing of the body is also a sign of farewell.

- *How is incense used in your parish?*
- *Do parishioners understand what it means to use incense during the funeral liturgy?*
- *How can the incensing be done in such a way that communicates respect and honour for the body of the deceased person?*

### **The Pall**

The pall is a large, white cloth that covers the coffin completely. It is simple in design and unadorned. It recalls the white baptismal garment and signifies that all are equal in the sight of God. Family members or friends of the dead person place the pall over the coffin. It is symbolic that the godparents might do this. If a flag or other insignia has been draped over the coffin, they are removed as the coffin is brought into the church.

- *Is there a custom of the pall in your parish?*
- *Do you understand the significance of it as a symbol?*
- *Could you introduce it?*
- *How helpful is it as a symbol?*
- *At present, what do you do with flags or jerseys?*

### **Book of the Gospels / Bible**

A book of the Gospels or a Bible may be placed on the coffin as a sign that Christians live by the word of God.

### **Cross**

A cross may be placed on the coffin. In baptism we were traced with the sign of the cross, during life we signed ourselves with the sign of the cross, and now at death, we share in Christ's victory over death.

- *Are these two customs in your parish?*
- *How would you introduce them?*



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