

Living Eternally Through Death and Dying III:

The Power of Ritualizing Death and Resurrection

A bulletin insert series informing and inspiring the faithful in the truths surrounding death and dying

The following is the third in a series of inserts related to death and dying. Future inserts will address: The Communion of Saints; and living wills, bequeaths, and Memorial Masses celebrated for our loved ones who have gone before us.

“In the face of death, the Church confidently proclaims that God has created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death that bound humanity.” (OCF [Order of Christian Funerals] #1)

The time following the death of a loved one is often one of heartrending grief for family and close friends. Through the meaningful celebration of the rites surrounding death, the Church manifests her tangible care for the living and her certain faith in Resurrection with Christ.

The Church ritualizes the phases of death’s reality through three distinct funeral rites.

1. The Vigil (Wake) Service (emphasizing the consolation of the living who grieve and look with hope for the resurrection)
2. The Funeral Liturgy of the Lord’s Resurrection (emphasizing the fact of Christ’s Victory over death)
3. The Rite of Committal (emphasizing the dignity of the human body as sacred)

The Vigil Service

The vigil is often the first time family, friends and members of the parish community gather in remembrance of the deceased, for prayer and for mutual support. This rite is usually celebrated on the eve before the Funeral Liturgy. It may be celebrated in the home of the deceased, in the funeral home, or even in the church.

The Funeral Liturgy

“The Funeral Liturgy is the central liturgical celebration of the Christian community for the deceased (OCF # 128). There are two forms of the funeral liturgy dependent upon circumstances: the Funeral Mass of the Lord’s Resurrection and the Funeral Liturgy Outside of Holy Mass.

Funeral Mass

The “Mass of Christian Burial”, focuses on Christ Jesus, who loves us totally and so endured the grave Himself, in order to conquer it. It is the greatest expression of the Church’s faith and Christ’s Victory. Through the action of Holy Mass, the life and death of our loved one is mystically united to the Life, Death and Resurrection of Christ Jesus poured forth. Beautiful imagery makes the symbols of one’s Baptism visible again at the funeral Mass. Where our

Baptism is the beginning of our eternal life in Christ, so the signs and symbols which fill the Funeral Mass harken back to the moment when Christ began to live eternally in us.

First, the casket carrying the body is brought into the Church draped with a white pall, reminiscent of the garment which clothes us at our Baptism. The lit Paschal candle (Easter Candle) is the sign of the triumph of Christ over death. This light of Resurrection burns aside the casket. At the funeral Mass, we behold the same light of Christ, trusting Jesus to lead us through the darkness of death to the fullness of His Kingdom. The casket then is sprinkled with holy water, recalling the water of our Baptism through which we died and rose with Christ in us.

The Funeral Liturgy Outside of Mass

In special circumstances (Sundays of Advent, Lent and Easter; Solemnities that are Holy Days of Obligation; Holy Thursday and the Paschal Triduum) celebration of a Funeral Mass is prohibited. The Funeral Liturgy outside of Mass may be a more suitable form of celebration at these times. The same symbolism as found in the Funeral Mass may be identified in the Funeral Liturgy Outside of Mass.

The Rite of Committal

The Rite of Committal is the final Funeral Rite. It "is the final act of the community of faith in caring for the body of its deceased member." (OCF #204) This rite is an act of faith in which we entrust to God (commend) our loved one and commit his/her body (or cremated remains) to a place that has been consecrated. This rite takes place grave-side, or perhaps at the place of a columbarium or other blessed location for burial.

Cremation

Through the centuries, the Church has followed the practice of burial or entombment of the human body, after the manner of Christ's own burial. This expresses respect for the human body, baptized into the Body of Christ which promises resurrection of the body. "The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burial be retained; but it does not forbid cremation, unless this is chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching" (canon 1176, § 3). If cremation is selected, it would ordinarily take place after the Funeral Liturgy.

Cremated remains should never be scattered, but are to be interred or inurned in a cemetery columbarium. The *scattering* of cremated remains on the ground or on the sea or keeping any portion of them for personal reasons is not the reverent final disposition that the Church directs. It should be noted that burial at sea of cremated remains differs from scattering. An appropriate and worthy container, heavy enough to be sent to its final resting place, may be dropped into the sea.