



Blessed Are They Who Mourn

*A Pastoral Letter to the Faithful
of the Archdiocese of Detroit
on our
Catholic Funeral Rites*



ETERNAL REST GRANT UNTO THEM, O LORD, AND LET
PERPETUAL LIGHT SHINE UPON THEM. MAY THEY REST IN
PEACE. AMEN. MAY THE SOULS OF ALL THE FAITHFUL
DEPARTED, THROUGH THE MERCY OF GOD, REST IN PEACE.
AMEN.

Blessed Are They Who Mourn

My Brothers and Sisters in the Lord:

In the Beatitudes, Jesus proclaims, “*Blessed are they who mourn for they shall be comforted.*” (Mt 5: 5) We trust in His words and know the truth of what Jesus says, and yet, we still struggle with fears and anxieties about our own death and dying and we feel the pain of having lost our departed loved ones. Over the centuries, in every culture, Christians have found meaning and hope, peace and consolation in the funeral rites of the Church in which we remember Christ’s own Death and Resurrection.

As St. Paul teaches in Romans 6, we began to share in that mystery already from the day of our Baptism; when we pass from this earthly realm, we will share fully in the gift of Christ’s Risen Life. Our future life with the Lord will also include our *body*, transformed and glorified. Though our bodies are laid to rest in burial or cremation, we trust that they will be given back to us in a new form on the last day when Christ will come again in saving judgment for all who believe in Him. In this present life, we pray for our own departed and we live with trust in His promise, hoping to share one day in Christ’s Resurrection with all our brothers and sisters.

By means of this letter, I hope your understanding and appreciation of our Catholic Funeral Rites will be deepened and that your questions regarding these matters are answered. Perhaps more than any other moment in the life journey, the time of death and dying is a premier opportunity to come to know the abiding and healing presence of the Risen Lord *in, with,* and *through* His Body, the Church.

Personal and Sacramental Presence With and For the Critically Ill and the Dying

We are reminded that among the corporal works of mercy is our duty as Christians to visit the sick on a regular basis. Most parishes have teams of communion ministers who bring the Holy Eucharist to the homebound and to nursing homes and hospitals within the parish boundaries. Most parishes also have at least one communal anointing service each year for those whose health is seriously impaired by sickness or age.

We do not live in isolation, nor should we die in isolation. As Christians, we live the story of Jesus Christ within the context of a *community of faith*. As members of a community of faith, we stand by those who are going through the dying process. We do so by our presence, prayers with and for the dying, and by our support for those left behind as they mourn the loss of their loved one.

Sacraments are for the *living*. The Church’s ritual presents *viaticum*, from the Latin meaning that Jesus assures the person “*I will make the journey with you.*” This final reception of the Holy Eucharist is administered as “the sacrament proper to dying.” Whenever possible, it should be preceded by the offer of sacramental confession from the priest.

After Vatican II, as the Church reformed its ritual for each of the sacraments, there was a deliberate decision no longer to refer to this as this sacrament as *Extreme Unction*, but, rather, as the *Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick*. As such, the sacrament is not reserved just for the last moments of one’s life journey but can be received as often as there are serious health concerns of body or spirit, chronic, acute, or terminal. (See “Catechism of the Catholic Church” § 1499—1532)

We would all like to have a priest present to administer the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and give *viaticum*, or Holy Communion for the dying. And yet, such is not always possible or realistic; ideally, we should try to take care of these things when serious illness comes. In any event, we can take consolation in remembering that the Church teaches us that if a person has already been anointed, even a few days or weeks previously, that person has been adequately prepared to meet the Lord.

It is for just such critical moments that most hospitals, nursing homes, and hospice centers have full-time pastoral staff and many parishes have pastoral ministers and bereavement ministers available and ready to be with the dying and their families. Throughout the archdiocese, permanent deacons, chaplains, and other ministers from the parish or health care facilities offer great consolation to families at the time of death and often help them plan the rites of the Vigil for the Deceased, Funeral Liturgy, and Committal Service. Only the priest, however, can sacramentally anoint the sick or those in danger of death.

Since sacraments are for the *living*, if the priest arrives after the person has already expired, ordinarily, he will not anoint the body; instead he will offer prayers for the dead and spend time with the family in prayer. At the time of death itself, many of us are present in various capacities—as physicians and nurses, chaplains, ministers, families, and friends; by our very presence, we are a sign of the prayer and support of the Church and give witness to faith in Christ's Resurrection.

Prayer for the Dead

Why and how do we pray for the dead? First of all, our prayer for the departed seeks God's mercy for any sins they may have committed through human weakness. Secondly, our intercessory prayers for the dead are also important for *us*, since they strengthen our communion with them and vividly remind us of our own responsibility to be ready for the hour of our own death. A beautiful and traditional way of expressing this loving solidarity with our departed is by making Mass offerings on their behalf. In this "source and summit" of our Christian worship, we celebrate and share in the mystery of Christ's Death and Resurrection, the means by which we experience forgiveness of sins and express and deepen our hope of one day sharing His victory with all those who have died in faith.

Among the many ways we can express our loving concern for the dead and their grieving loved ones, Christian prayer *with* and *for* the departed and their families is undoubtedly the greatest treasure and blessing we can share. The Funeral Liturgy of the Church suggests a short ritual entitled "*Gathering in the Presence of the Body*"; it can easily be shared before family viewing. This prayer—simple and brief as it may be—is actually the first official ritual of celebrating death, and so, it begins with the Sign of the Cross; it may be led by a priest, deacon, pastoral minister, or family member. The Church's official prayer continues with the Vigil for the Deceased, Funeral Liturgy, and Committal (see below); at the same time, our own personal prayer is also an important accompaniment to the public prayer of the Church.

The Funeral Rites

The "Order of Christian Funerals" (OCF), revised in 1989, envisions the funeral rites as comprising three principal moments: the Vigil for the Deceased, the Funeral Liturgy, and the Rite of Committal.

The presiding minister of the Vigil service is usually a priest or a deacon; however, other pastoral staff or members of the parish community can also serve as leaders. As much as possible, the family of the deceased should participate in planning and celebrating the Vigil. Ideally, music should also be incorporated into the Vigil service. While many Catholics find the rosary to be very comforting at the time of death, the ritual of the Church clearly prefers a Vigil service with Scripture readings and prayers. The rosary may be said by members of the family, various fraternal or social organizations, or by a staff member at any time during the visitation period. In some cases, the recitation of the rosary may be interspersed with Scriptural selections. The Vigil service is also the appropriate setting for family or friends to offer eulogies or tributes. If done at the conclusion of the Funeral Liturgy, they should be kept to a minimum (usually one brief eulogy of three to five minutes).

In recent years, many parishes have arranged for the body of the deceased to lie in state in the church proper or in the gathering space immediately prior to the Funeral Liturgy. This practice permits family and friends to gather directly at the Church and allows for a more natural flow of events at the beginning of the funeral rites in the Church. I encourage this practice whenever possible.

There are two forms for the Funeral Liturgy: the Funeral Mass and the Funeral Liturgy *outside Mass*. For active and practicing Roman Catholics, the Funeral Mass is the preferred and normal form. On certain days of the Church Year—Holy Days or Solemnities of Obligation and the Triduum (Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday)—Funeral Masses are not permitted. On those days, or on occasions when a priest is not available or when the pastor and family judge that a Funeral Mass would not be suitable, then a Funeral Liturgy *outside Mass* can be chosen.

Since the Mass is a *communal* action involving the whole parish, Funeral Masses should be celebrated in the local parish Church. Unless there are extraordinary circumstances, I cannot envision any time when it would be acceptable to celebrate a Funeral Mass in the funeral home. If a Funeral Liturgy *outside Mass* is celebrated, a deacon or priest may preside, and such a celebration may take place either in the Church or funeral home.

Following the Funeral Liturgy, the body is taken for burial. Again, the Church is present in this final act of celebrating the life of the deceased. There are two forms of the committal service—one when the Funeral Liturgy has immediately preceded burial and the other when there has been *no* Funeral Liturgy. This second form is used only rarely, for example, when burial has been delayed for some weeks or months or when the body has been shipped back for local interment. The prayer of committal can be offered at the graveside or in a chapel. These prayers are also offered for bodies donated to science, a practice that is in harmony with Church teaching and custom because it shows respect for the dignity of the body and the possibility of sharing with others our body and/or its various organs. (See “Catechism of the Catholic Church” § 2301)

Questions Regarding Burial and Cremation Issues

Over the centuries—indeed from the time and experience of the Jewish people and Jesus himself—the normal manner of religious burial has been burial of the body in the ground or in a mausoleum. Since 1963, as long as there is no intentional denial of the Resurrection of the body, the Catholic Church has allowed cremation. In cases where cremation is chosen, the Funeral Liturgy should be celebrated *prior* to cremation. In those cases where the body has been cremated immediately after death, it is still possible to celebrate a Funeral Liturgy (Mass or service) with the cremated remains of the body (cremains) present.

According to our Liturgical rites (and especially as outlined in the 1997 Appendix 2, *Cremation*, of the 1989 OCF), these cremated remains are not treated as we would the casket with the body of the deceased. For example, the urn is *not* covered with a pall and incense is *not* used. Following the Funeral Liturgy, the cremated remains of the body are to be buried in a cemetery or columbarium. These cremated remains are *not* to be scattered, divided among the survivors, or kept in an urn in a residence or a work place. It is appropriate, even encouraged, to invite the priest, deacon, or pastoral minister to be present for the interment or entombment of the ashes, even several days after the funeral itself.

Parishes that have their own parish cemeteries have received Archdiocesan permission to create a columbarium for the interment of cremated remains. Since the Church does not encourage cremation as the usual pattern for Christian burial, here in the archdiocese, the building of columbaria has been restricted to those parishes which already have a parish cemetery; the columbarium is seen as an extension of the service provided by the parish through its cemetery. If you do not have access to such a parish columbarium, our Catholic cemeteries offer this service, as well as most non-Catholic cemeteries. The important point to remember is this: out of respect for what was once a human body and what will be raised up in Resurrection, cremated remains of the body are to be buried in the ground or interred in the niche of a columbarium or mausoleum.

Ideally, the choice of a burial place should be made prior to death. While not strictly required, Catholics are strongly encouraged to select a burial plot within a Catholic cemetery. While the procession to the cemetery can often seem protracted and inconvenient, it is a significant gesture of respect as the family community accompanies the body or the cremated remains to the final resting place. Priests, deacons, pastoral ministers, or funeral directors may lead these prayers at the graveside or in a nearby chapel.

Catholic cemeteries are sacred places which perform several functions: they give tangible witness to our belief in the Resurrection of the dead and provide an appropriate place to gather for prayer, private meditation, and the celebration of the Eucharist, especially on Memorial Day and All Souls (November 2). Catholic cemeteries are places of catechesis that invite all of us to deeper conversion of heart by reflecting on the transitory nature of our lives.

Symbols

Symbols are an integral part of our liturgical life; through them, the Church celebrates and teaches our faith. In the celebration of Christian death, there are certain time-honored symbols the Church has chosen to represent our faith in the Resurrection. The Paschal Candle, the symbol of Christ whose Resurrection conquered the darkness of the world, should always be placed in a prominent and visible place near the casket or the cremated remains of the body. The funeral pall, or white cloth covering the casket, recalls our baptismal robe. Holy water also recalls our baptism and incense reminds us that our whole life as a Christian should be an offering of worship and praise rising up to God's glory out of gratitude for our life and our salvation. The ritual also suggests the possibility of placing a Crucifix or an open Book of the Gospels on the casket.

Over and above these symbols, other secular symbols or signs (such as the American flag) should *not* be included in the Funeral Liturgy. In the case of a departed veteran, the flag should be removed from the casket at the door of the church and then replaced with the pall. At the conclusion of the Funeral Liturgy, after the pall has been removed and as the body leaves the Church, the flag may once again adorn the casket.

Music is also an important symbol; therefore, only liturgically appropriate music should be used during the Funeral Liturgy. Non-liturgical sentimental musical favorites of the deceased may be played before or after the Vigil Service or at the funeral luncheon, but they should not be used during the liturgy itself.

Hospitality at the Time of Death

Hospitality is one of the hallmarks of our Christian faith. This virtue is especially critical as families experience death and loss. I have already written our clergy about their privilege and duty of being exemplary ministers of hospitality by their presence and compassion. Ordinarily, unless there are some special circumstances, pastors should be disposed toward burial of any baptized Roman Catholic. This is also true for parishioners who have not been practicing due to an extended illness or residence in a convalescent center, parishioners who have not been contributing financially, or people who have committed suicide. The Church also provides funeral services *outside Mass* for non-Catholics who are a parishioner's spouse, child, or parent.

I have instructed our priests not to expect payment for themselves or for their parishes for funeral services. If families have the means to offer a stipend and wish to do so, it is entirely appropriate and just, but at the same time, no one should feel compelled to do so. At the same time, we should remember that funerals require a definite financial outlay on the part of the parish—costs involving staff, organist, lighting, heating/cooling, etc. Many parishes that are economically challenged, often with larger old buildings, are the very same parishes which have an aging population and a large number of funerals, often for parishioners who moved to another part of the metropolitan area. We should be sensitive to the financial challenges and limitations of these parishes; when and where possible, we should give generous consideration—not just for the funeral itself but also for services rendered over the years.

As much as possible, the parish community should be involved in the funeral ritual and related events. Many parishes now have ministers of bereavement who assist the family both during and following the Funeral Liturgy. Some parishes have special choirs for funerals and host funeral luncheons to assist the family during this time of special need. If you have the time, I encourage you to consider volunteering to be a part of outreach to the sick and dying, and to serve in some form of funeral ministry at your parish. Whether we bring Communion to the sick, sing in a parish choir, pray, are present at the Funeral Mass or the Vigil for the Deceased, or help coordinate a funeral luncheon, *all* members of the parish have a responsibility to assist those who mourn. One way the parish expresses its continued love and prayer for the deceased and their families is through explicit mention of the departed in the General Intercessions of weekend Liturgies.

And of course, hospitality does not cease once a person is buried; since the grief *after* the funeral is often the more painful, our parishes should stand by families in the weeks and months that follow the funeral. Many parishes have the commendable tradition of hosting an annual memorial liturgy (usually in November) at which the family and friends of those who have died gather in solidarity and prayer.

Many ethnic groups have the tradition of gathering as a family to celebrate Mass on the 30-day, 40-day, or one-year anniversary of death. Whether we remember the deceased as a community of faith or as individuals, the value of prayer can never be underestimated. Although the physical bond no longer exists, our spiritual bond with them continues beyond the grave. Our prayer reminds us that our relationship with the departed now exists in the Communion of Saints.

Creating a Culture of Life

Our contemporary American society is obsessed with death. On the one hand, out of fear of death, some may try to shield themselves from its painful reality. On the other hand, some despair of living and see death as a quick fix or a “solution,” overwhelmed by the pace, demands, and ambiguities of life, feeling trapped in deep depression, or facing the prognosis of a long, slow dying process. Given the fact that most suicides are the result of great psychological turmoil and, therefore, are not done with full freedom, the Church does not judge the state of mind or soul of someone who has committed suicide. In fact, we pray for their salvation and trust in God’s mercy for them. Every parish should, therefore, offer victims of suicide and their families the same loving care and pastoral hospitality they would provide for any other funeral.

As our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, has taught so eloquently and consistently—in spoken and written word and through his own example—the “Gospel of Life” was very much at the heart of Jesus’ message. Every human life is sacred—from the first moment of conception until last natural breath—God created us in His own image and likeness and sent His Son to redeem us. Our respect for the dying and our reverential burial of the dead are important signs to one another and the wider society of our respect for life. For that reason, the body of every person, even after death, should still be accorded every respect and reverence and a dignified burial.

In our culture, quite often Christian funerals can become elaborate and extravagant. While we should show respect for the deceased, at the same time, simplicity is also appropriate lest we lose sight of the fact that we are mere pilgrims in this world. Many Christians give great witness to their fellow believers and the wider society precisely by their choice for a very simple casket and their suggestion that memorials should be made on behalf of certain charitable causes. In fact, the best possible way to remember our departed and remain in communion with them is through the beautiful and time-honored tradition of Masses offered on behalf of their souls. For in the Holy Eucharist, we celebrate Christ’s own Death and Resurrection and experience and deepen our communion with Him, the forgiveness of our sins and those who have died in faith, and our own hope of life eternal is strengthened.

Respect for Our Cultural Diversity

Whether we realize it or not, every aspect of our lives has been shaped by the language, symbols, and tradition of our particular racial and ethnic experience. Here in southeast Michigan, we form a mosaic of more than one hundred different racial and ethnic cultures; as a Church, we respect and treasure all these diverse ways of expressing our one same faith. Such respect for cultural tradition is especially important at times of serious illness, dying and death, and all the rituals that are part of a funeral.

For instance, among Hispanic peoples, because of their intense Marian devotion—especially seeking the intercession of the Sorrowful Mother—reciting the rosary may be a part

of the Scripture Service at the Vigil or *velorio*. Hispanic families also have the custom of gathering for a *novenario*, nine days of prayer after the funeral.

Meanwhile, at the time of death and visitation at the funeral home, African-Americans treasure a sacred time called the “family hour” which naturally gives a special shape to the Vigil Service, readings, and music chosen.

Yet another example is the custom of many Middle Eastern cultures to express their grief very loudly and often in sighs and groans of lament.

A letter such as this cannot hope to touch on every possible ethnic or racial tradition; my point is that we should give great respect to the cultural diversity of faith expression of all Catholics, especially at the time of death.

Discussion of End-of-Life Issues and Planning for One's Own Funeral

None of us knows when God will call us home; therefore, we should continually prepare for our eventual death. We can do this in our own prayer by meditating on our mortality. We should also consider what we would want done if we were to become incapacitated or unable to make decisions on our own. We should discuss our preferences and desires with our family and loved ones ahead of time and, preferably, write them down.

In 1991, the Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC) published a booklet entitled “*To Let Live, To Let Die*.” It covers such items as advanced medical directives and durable power of attorney; a revised edition is forthcoming. Copies may be obtained by calling 800-395-5565 or via the Internet at www.micatholicconference.org.

It is always good to have our financial affairs in order so as to be less of a burden on those we leave behind. Just as we strongly encourage our priests to have a will and to give directions regarding their Funeral Liturgy, I extend that same encouragement to you. These directions could include musical selections, Scripture readings, and even indications regarding participants in the Liturgy.

Gratitude and Commendation for All Who Offer Leadership in Christian Hospitality and Pastoral Care for the Dying and the Departed. Their Families and Friends

In a letter such as this, I would be remiss if I did not especially acknowledge and publicly thank all those who deal with the challenge of death and dying on a daily basis:

- Physicians and nurses
- Hospice and health care workers—both paid and volunteer
- Priests, deacons, and pastoral ministers
- Chaplains
- Parish liturgists and musicians
- Parish bereavement and Stephen ministers
- Funeral directors, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, as well as their trained staff who give special time and ongoing ministry to the grieving
- Those involved in the service of maintaining quality Catholic cemeteries and other places of burial and entombment

In ways known only to God, their service of consolation and silent presence and deeds of gentle compassion make a considerable difference for all who mourn. In Christ's name and on behalf of our whole Church, I thank them and pray that they themselves may be blessed as they bring blessings to those who mourn.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to reiterate several points:

- ✦ At all times, the Christian community should be prayerfully aware of, sensitive to, and present with the dying and the families that mourn their loss.
- ✦ According to the Church's ritual, *viaticum*, or final reception of the Holy Eucharist, is "the sacrament proper to the dying." Ideally, and if possible, sacramental confession should be made available prior to reception of *viaticum*.
- ✦ The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick should be administered to those who are still alive. Ordinarily, if the priest arrives after a person has already died, the body is blessed but not anointed. While only priests may anoint, other pastoral ministers can lead the family in prayer. Once a person has been anointed, it is not necessary to be anointed repeatedly or at the very moment of death.
- ✦ *The Order of Christian Funerals* (1989) is the only official ritual for celebrating the funeral rites. The 1997 *Appendix 2* of the OCF addresses cremation rites.
- ✦ Since burial of the dead is a corporal work of mercy, as far as reasonably possible, it is our privilege and responsibility to share in events surrounding the Christian death and burial of other parishioners. Besides prayer with and for the departed and their families, we may wish to volunteer to serve as bereavement ministers, assisting in the planning and celebration of the Funeral Rites and related events.
- ✦ The Funeral Rites include the Gathering in the Presence of the Body, the Vigil for the Deceased, the Liturgy, and the Committal; as such, they form a unity. The rosary, while a beautiful and complimentary devotion, should not replace the Vigil service.
- ✦ The usual Funeral Liturgy is the Funeral Mass that should normally be celebrated in the parish church. The Liturgy *outside Mass*, used only in certain instances, may be celebrated in the church or at the funeral home by either a priest or a deacon.
- ✦ Catholics are encouraged to choose a Catholic cemetery for burial.
- ✦ While burial of the whole body is preferred, for a variety of reasons, a person may choose cremation. Ideally, the funeral rites should be conducted *before* cremation. When the body has already been cremated, a Funeral Liturgy may be celebrated with the cremated remains of the body present.
- ✦ Cremated remains of the body should be buried or interred; for that reason, some parishes have a columbarium. If such a parish columbarium is not available for the family, cremated remains should be buried in a grave or a mausoleum.
- ✦ Christian symbols and music are an important part of the Funeral Liturgy. Secular symbols, as well as eulogies or tributes for the deceased, may be incorporated into the Vigil service at the committal or during the funeral luncheon. If there is a eulogy at the Liturgy itself, there should be only one (no more than three to five minutes) after the post-Communion prayer.

✦ As Christians, we should strive to be hospitable at all times, especially to the family of a recently deceased person. In keeping with this principle, no parish should ever refuse to bury a parishioner or require a fee. Families with adequate means should make some appropriate offering to the parish, especially if the parish is financially challenged.

✦ It is important that we plan for our eventual death in both spiritual and material ways. Spiritually, we should daily reflect upon our journey back to the Lord. Materially, we should try to ensure that our death will not cause undue financial or physical hardships to our family or friends.

As Christians, our own life story and destiny are very strongly interwoven with the story of the Death-Resurrection of Jesus and the story of our community of faith. In celebrating Christian death and burial, we bring consolation to those who mourn and we ourselves grow in understanding the meaning of life in this world and the promise of life eternal. As we all go through the cycle of Death-Resurrection in our families and in our parishes, may we look to St. Joseph, patron of a happy death, and the Blessed Virgin Mary for their protection and guidance. As we continue together on our pilgrim way to life eternal with the Lord and one another, let us find peace and strength from the words of the Church's final commendation of the dying:

Go forth, Christian soul, from this world in the name of God the Almighty Father, who created you, in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, who suffered for you, in the name of the Holy Spirit, who was poured out upon you. Go forth, faithful Christian!

Sincerely yours in the Lord,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Adam Cardinal Maida". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross symbol at the beginning.

Adam Cardinal Maida
Archbishop of Detroit

*Issued on the Commemoration of
All the Faithful Departed (All Souls)
November 2, 2001*

This pastoral letter is available for download at
www.archdioceseofdetroit.org



*“We escaped with our lives
like a bird from the fowler’s snare;
the snare was broken and we escaped.
Our help is in the name of the Lord,
the maker of heaven and earth.”
Psalm 124: 6-7*

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