

DIOCESE OF ANTIGONISH
GUIDELINES FOR FUNERALS

April 27, 2011

Preamble

For the past few years, the Liturgical Commission of the Diocese of Antigonish has been gathering information about the experience of funerals within the diocese. This experience has led to the need for some guidelines regarding the liturgical celebration of funerals. While the *Order of Christian Funerals* (OCF) deals with many details of these celebrations, the following guidelines have been highlighted as more appropriate to our diocesan experience. A few years ago, the Council of Priests was consulted on these guidelines. These guidelines are presented as an assistance for clergy, liturgy committees, musicians, funeral directors, lay ministers and those who minister with bereaved individuals and families.

When a death has occurred, it is vital that the clergy, the funeral director and the family be in communication.

The *Order of Christian Funerals* teaches that there are three principal ritual moments in the funerals of Christians: 1) The Vigil and Related Rites and Prayers 2) The Funeral Liturgy and 3) The Rite of Committal (OCF, n. 50). The only ritual book approved for use in Canada is the *Order of Christian Funerals* published in 1990 by CCCB.

Clergy and pastoral teams are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the many options included in the *Order of Christian Funerals*. A parish bereavement team can provide assistance

I. THE VIGIL AND RELATED RITES AND PRAYERS

The *Order of Christian Funerals* provides a model for prayer when the family first gathers in the presence of the body (OCF, nn. 70-81). This model of prayer can be a very powerful experience of the community's compassion for the family. The Vigil for the deceased is the principal rite celebrated by the Christian community in the time following death and before the funeral liturgy. "The Vigil may be celebrated in the home of the deceased, in the funeral home, parlor, or chapel of rest, or in some other suitable place. It may also be celebrated in the church, especially if the body has been received there in advance, but at a time well before the funeral liturgy, so that the funeral liturgy will not be lengthy and the liturgy of the word repetitious" (OCF, n. 83).

The Vigil is the first principal ritual action with the community and family. Organizations (e.g. CWL, K of C, Royal Canadian Legion, etc.) are welcomed to join the one common prayer service. Instead of fractioning this period of time with several different prayer

services, it would be more beneficial to unite together in prayer as one. To further this goal, a set time could be publicized in the Obituary notice.

The OCF recognizes our need to reflect on the life of a loved one who has just died. It specifically provides an opportunity for a family member or friend to speak at the Vigil for the deceased -- just before the concluding rite (OCF, n. 109).

“Music should be provided for the vigil” (OCF, n. 32). A parish bereavement team can help facilitate liturgical music preparation. If a family has a favorite (religious/non-religious) song request it may be sung at the end of the Vigil Service following the concluding prayer.

Requests for Eulogies

Increasingly today, parishes receive requests for eulogies during funeral celebrations. As stated above in the section on vigils, the OCF recognizes our need to reflect on the life of a loved one, and the vigil is an excellent time (and the primary time) to do this. There are cases however, when there is no vigil or when a family insists on having words of remembrance in church and when refusal would cause serious pastoral harm. We recommend that in such cases the **words of remembrance take place prior to the start of the funeral liturgy**. As the family gathers at the entrance of the Church in the presence of the remains and before the introductory rites, one person speaks on their behalf. The talk should be written out and shown beforehand to the priest or a member of the pastoral staff. It should conclude with an invitation to the assembly to participate fully in the church’s funeral liturgy.

The practice of having the Words of Remembrance at the beginning of the funeral liturgy should not be a regular practice, but only recommended for those situations where it is deemed pastorally necessary to allow words of remembrance in the church. The ideal time for these words is still the vigil or the luncheon reception.

II. FUNERAL LITURGY

The Funeral Mass is ordinarily celebrated in the parish church. In Canada, a funeral Mass may be celebrated on any day except Sundays, solemnities of obligation, Holy Thursday and during the Easter Triduum (OCF, n. 322).

The Funeral Liturgy Outside of Mass should be celebrated in the parish church. However, in extraordinary circumstances, in consultation with the pastor, it may be celebrated in another suitable place, e.g., a funeral home, parlor, chapel of rest, or cemetery chapel.

Sometimes funerals involve a deceased person who requires the use of the Canadian flag or a banner from an organization like the CWL or K of C. Any flag or banner on the casket at the entrance of the Church is to be removed with due ceremony in preparation for the placement of the pall. The flag or banner may be displayed in an environment corner, if the family requests. The pall will be removed after the liturgy, and the flag/banner may again be placed on the casket as it is being brought from the church.

The family is encouraged to place the pall on the casket during the Rite of Reception. The pall is “a reminder of the garment given in baptism and therefore signifying life in Christ” (OCF, n. 301). Nothing is to be placed on the pall. With cremation, this rite is omitted.

In building and renovation of churches, consideration should be given to space allotted at the entrance of the church for the gathering rites which include the placement of the pall.

The **ministry of hospitality** is not just for Sunday Eucharist. The value of hospitality takes on added significance at funerals when we are ministers of God’s compassion to those in grief, and when many not familiar with the parish, may be expected.

For people unfamiliar with Catholic postures during Liturgy, the presider may help the assembly know when to sit and stand with appropriate hand gestures.

Honour guards such as CWL, K of C, Royal Canadian Legion, etc. may be used as requested by family and should stand at the entrance of the church as space permits.

Music is integral to the funeral rites. The texts of the songs chosen for a particular celebration should express the paschal mystery of the Lord’s suffering, death, and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture (OCF, General Introduction, n. 30). It should be noted that the text of the songs chosen must be approved for use in the Catholic liturgy and should be familiar to the family. Non-liturgical songs do not have a place in the funeral liturgy.

In terms of **soloists and special requests**, a funeral liturgy is an official liturgy of the Catholic Church and, therefore, the principles governing music in all liturgical celebrations must be respected. For example, if a family requests a friend to be a soloist, this person should not replace the music ministry but be invited to join them. If instrumental music is requested, it is appropriate at the presentation of the gifts. It may also be appropriate as recessional music.

Lectors: The readings are proclaimed from the lectionary, not from a missalette, a booklet or a loose sheet of paper. While we are waiting for the publication of the “Ritual Lectionary”, a suitable binder of funeral readings may be used.

The Presentation of Gifts is an appropriate time to have family members participate.

Family members may be encouraged to participate in the ministries with appropriate preparation, provided they are comfortable and familiar with our Catholic liturgical practice. A rehearsal is recommended for those who are not regular lectors. Furthermore, “Family members [...] should not be asked to assume any role that their grief or sense of loss may make too burdensome” (OCF, n. 15).

Some families may be disconnected from our liturgical practices for any number of reasons. In order to safeguard the dignity and reverence required for the celebration and to allow these people to be at ease if they choose to participate in the ministries, bereavement committees should meet with these people and prepare them for their participation in the

ministries.

Communion: In light of the Church’s recent encouragement for communion from the cup and current diocesan directions, communion under both kinds should be considered at funeral liturgies.

Final Commendation

In the liturgy there are moments that call for reverential silence. In the funeral liturgy, the Final Commendation begins with an invitation to prayer (OCF, n. 340). The invitation to prayer has often been mistaken with the prayer itself. At the end of this invitation perhaps the presider could invite the assembly to pray silently for the deceased and the needs of the family. The recommended “prayer” is a “period of silence” (OCF, n. 341). The dignity of this ritual moment is greatly enhanced if this silence is kept. The silence is then broken with the Signs of Farewell (Holy Water and Incense). Holy Water can now be used provided it has not been used at the beginning of the Liturgy. “Then as a sign of respect for the body of the deceased, which was a temple of the holy spirit, the coffin may be incensed” (OCF, n. 371).

The “Song of Farewell” is the climax to the Final Commendation. The way this song is sung should indicate its significance to this ritual moment. Every parish should have one or two hymns that are used regularly so they become familiar to the assembly. It is the community song accompanying the deceased on their journey to their true home land.

III. RITE OF COMMITTAL

The Rite of Committal is a very important moment in the journey of death and bereavement and should not be omitted or truncated except for very serious reasons. The heart of the rite is the actual prayer and action of committal of the body to the earth. In communities where the practice of lowering the casket completely into the ground is still common, this practice should be continued and encouraged.

The *Order of Christian Funerals* states that “the rite of committal, the conclusion of the funeral rites, is celebrated at the grave” (OCF, n. 512). Celebrating this rite at the entrance of the church is inappropriate. If the committal is not to take place at the end of the funeral liturgy, then the committal prayers are not used at all.

In parishes where caskets are kept in vaults during the winter, burials should take place as soon as possible in the spring.

In order to address different circumstances such as suicide, sudden or accidental death, see OCF, n. 604.

IV. CREMATION

In Canada, the National Liturgy Office of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has

published a pamphlet in 2003 called *Catholics and Cremation*. Apart from not using the pall, the National Liturgy Office suggests that cremated remains be treated with the same respect as the body.

The church prefers that cremation take place after the full funeral liturgy with the body. The long standing practice of burying the body of the deceased in a grave or tomb in memory of Jesus whose body was placed in a tomb continues to be encouraged as a sign of Christian faith. Cremation often takes place immediately or soon after death. Appropriate containers, such as, a classic urn, are proper for the cremated remains. Furthermore, the entire cremated remains of the person should be placed in the urn and should not be separated in any manner or made into jewelry, dishes or anything like this.

If cremation has taken place before the liturgy, the urn ought to be carried with dignity and reverence in the entrance procession and placed on a small table covered with a white cloth which has been placed in the isle where the coffin is usually located. The urn is never placed on or immediately in front of the altar. While pictures of the deceased have been used at the funeral home and sometimes placed on the table in the church, this practice should be discontinued, for just as no pictures accompany a casket, so no pictures should accompany the urn in the Church. The paschal candle is placed near the table with the vessel of the cremated remains.

According to Christian tradition, the ashes of the deceased should be reverently buried or entombed in a place reserved for the burial of the dead. A specific place for a person's remains helps focus the remembering and prayer for the deceased person by the family and friends, and by the Church in general. Also, such a place will make it easier to memorialize the deceased, for example, with plaques which record names and dates.

Scattering cremated remains on the sea, in the air, on the ground, or keeping them in the homes of relatives does not display appropriate reverence. The Church does not offer a prayer service when that kind of disposal has been chosen and liturgical rites should not accompany any method of disposal of the ashes which is not in harmony with this Christian tradition.

Conclusion

May these Guidelines assist all those who minister to those who have lost loved ones so that the Lord's consolation and peace may be experienced.

Approved for use in the Diocese of Antigonish, April 27, 2011.

† Brian Joseph Dunn
Bishop of Antigonish