



For Catholics, a Final Celebration and Thanksgiving

By Michael R. Heinlein

For most Catholic funerals, the Mass of Christian Burial is chosen. The normal place for its celebration is the parish church of the deceased. As with the planning of any Mass, many decisions must be made about options for aspects like music and readings or persons taking a part in one way or another. Several of these components would also be considered for a funeral outside of Mass. These decisions are usually made in consultation with parish staff.

1. Readings

The readings from Scripture “provide the family and the community with an opportunity to hear God speak to them in their needs, sorrows, fears and hopes” (Order of Christian Funerals, No. 22). There are four readings for a Catholic funeral. Parish staff usually supply family with copies of the readings from which they can make their decision. The first



reading is typically one of seven options provided from the Old Testament. The exception to this is when the funeral takes place during the Easter season, in which case a first reading is chosen from one of five options found in either Acts of the Apostles or Revelation. The responsorial psalm may be recited, but is most typically sung. There are 17 options for the psalms that may be chosen. Typically there are several different musical settings for each, so that can be discussed with the parish staff. The second reading most typically comes from one of St. Paul’s letters, although there are two of the 17 New Testament options that come from the first letter of St. John. There are 24 options to choose from for Gospel readings, most of which are from the Gospel of St. John. In addition to all of the options of readings above, which are aimed at funerals for adults, there are two other sets of readings for funerals of children, either before or after baptism.

2. Prayers

The orations of the presiding minister address God on behalf of the entire Church in their prayer for the deceased. In addition to general orations (either inside or outside the Easter season), there are a variety of options that may be suited to more specific circumstances — such as for a young person, for one who suffered a long illness, or one who died suddenly, etc. There are five options for the preface of the Eucharistic prayer. And Eucharistic prayers



1-4 have special inserts for a Mass on the day of burial. The special insert for Eucharistic Prayer 3 is particularly poignant.

3. Music

The music chosen for a Christian funeral “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, No. 30). As a resource to those planning funerals, many parishes will often have a list of hymns appropriate for use at a funeral from which to select. “The music at funerals should support, console and uplift the participants” (OCF, No. 31). While it might differ based on parish custom, there are normally three hymns chosen for use at the entrance, preparation of the gifts and at the reception of Communion. There is also what’s called the song of farewell, sung at the end of the funeral Mass during the final commendation. This is also something to discuss with the parish staff if you are interested in options. Both the General Instruction of the Roman Missal and the Order of Christian Funerals suggest the importance to incorporate an element of silence at the Mass, and this is no different for funerals. Moments of silence “permit the assembly to reflect upon the word of God and the meaning of the celebration” (OCF, No. 4).

4. Liturgical ministers

It is natural to want to include at the funeral various family and friends of the deceased. Because many of these roles are liturgical, great care must be taken to ensure that these ministers all well-trained and suitable. You may wish to choose readers for the first and second readings, to present the gifts at the offertory or to serve the Mass. Perhaps those with musical talents might be able to utilize them in consultation with the parish staff. In addition to liturgical ministers, there might be the need for pall bearers (usually six) or representatives of the family or close friends to place the pall and Christian symbols on the casket or near the cremains.

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