

Understanding the Requiem Rites of the Catholic Church

A. The Purpose of a Requiem Mass

In the Catholic Church, a Funeral Mass serves several purposes. The Church offers prayers for the soul of the one who has died, asking God to “open the gates of paradise” to them, and to grant them forgiveness for any sins they may have committed. In offering these prayers as part of the Mass, we make them part of the offering Jesus made to God his Father on the cross, and we come into His presence.

The Funeral Mass, while primarily offered for the benefit of the deceased, is also for the benefit of the bereaved. The Scriptural Readings and the priest’s homily are to strengthen the faith of the mourners, helping them to believe in God’s promises; by this they can offer comfort in a difficult time.

While praying for the deceased and comforting the bereaved, the Funeral Mass also offers people the opportunity to say farewell to a loved one—a difficult thing, since no one ever welcomes this farewell. For this reason, as well as the family and close friends, other friends and acquaintances, as well as members of the Parish, will attend a Funeral Mass to show their respect, offer their condolences and join in the prayers.

The Requiem Mass is focussed on two things: the one who has died and the “Paschal Mystery” of Jesus Christ—his death and resurrection. We will remember the deceased as a member of the family of the Church, who received eternal life when they were baptised, as well as remembering them as part of their own family and circle of friends.

B. Key Elements in the Requiem Mass

Welcome of the Deceased (Rite of Reception)

At the beginning of the Funeral Mass, we welcome the body of the one who has died into the Church. The priest will greet the coffin and the mourners at the door of the Church, and bless it with holy water. This harks back to the very first time the deceased entered Church—on the day of their baptism. On arriving in Church, we place symbols of the Catholic Faith on the coffin, to acknowledge that this person was a member of the Church through Baptism: the Cross and the Book of Gospels are placed on the coffin with appropriate prayers. The symbol of the Easter Candle is lit, as a sign of the light of Christ shining on our beloved brother or sister who has died.

Reading from Scripture (Liturgy of the Word)

In every Catholic service one of the most important features is listening to readings from the Bible—what we call the Liturgy of the Word (of God). Rather than just using our own words at the difficult time of bereavement, we turn to the Word of God to see what hope God offers us. After God’s Word, the priest will preach the Homily, which will try to open up the biblical readings and apply them to the person we are praying for.

Celebration of the Eucharist and Holy Communion (Liturgy of the Eucharist)

After the Liturgy of the Word, we move to the altar, to remember the Last Supper of Jesus. We offer gifts of bread and wine, which the priest will pray over, just as Jesus did with his disciples. The Catholic Church believes that Jesus really gave his Body and Blood to his disciples, and he does the same thing today. When the priest uses his words “This is my Body, this is my Blood”, the bread changes into the Body of Christ and the wine changes into His Precious Blood. We always treat these with the utmost reverence,

and ask that others, even if not of our faith, show similar respect. This is the real presence of Jesus, Son of God, who comes to be with us in this moment of grief and mourning. His gift of his Body and Blood are shared in Holy Communion: we believe that sharing in communion is a sign of our unity in the Church—for this reason we do not believe that we can share communion yet with members of different Churches. Nevertheless, non-Catholics are invited to receive a blessing at the time of Holy Communion if they wish.

After communion, and before the Final Farewell, there is a moment for us to reflect on the memory of the deceased. Much will have been said in the Homily, but sometimes families wish to lead a short reflection, often in the form of memories of that person's life or perhaps a prayer that means a lot to the family. Whatever is read, it should obviously be suitable for use in Church and as part of the Mass.

Commendation and Farewell (Rite of Commendation)

After this the Church says farewell to the deceased, using the symbols of Holy Water and Incense: Holy Water remembers baptism once more; incense is burned in Church for those things which are most special and sacred, and incensing the coffin honours the body of the one who has died. The priest will then offer the Prayer of Commendation, which asks to God to welcome our departed brother or sister into Paradise. After this we will make our way out of Church to the place of Committal.

C. Hymns and other Music

Sacred music is important in our celebrations in the Catholic Church, since it adds solemnity and a sense of celebration to our rites. It will be normal to have some singing at a Funeral Mass, and the bereaved will be consulted about the choice of hymns for the Funeral. It should be noted, however, that only hymns and music that are "religious" in nature are allowed in Church. Other music may have its more rightful place at the Crematorium or at the Graveside.

D. Involvement of Families in the Requiem Mass

Every mourner will be "involved" in the Funeral Mass by their presence and their prayers, and by their listening to the words that are proclaimed and spoken during the Mass. There are certain elements, however, that allow for greater involvement should a family so wish. (This is entirely optional: the parish has ministers who will be able to carry out all these functions if family members do not wish to do so.)

Carrying the Coffin

Occasionally family members will wish to share this task. It should be arranged with the Funeral Director.

Scripture Reading

If there is someone amongst family or friends who can proclaim the Bible Reading or read the Bidding Prayers, you may wish to invite them to do so at the Funeral Mass.

Presenting the Gifts

If there are younger members of the family who wish to be involved at a Funeral Mass, you may feel it is suitable for them to bring up the gifts of bread and wine to the priest at the appropriate moment.

Remembrance of the Deceased

After communion someone may wish to speak in memory of the deceased. This should always be discussed in detail with the priest who will preside at the Funeral Mass. It may be that you (or another member of your family) would like to say something, but feel unable to stand up in Church and do so; in this case, please write some points down, so that the priest can incorporate them in the Homily.

The Priest will gladly assist you in all of this, and advising families about Service Booklets, if chosen.