

Church of the Holy Family

Funeral Guidelines

The Meaning of Death & Christian Hope

In the face of death, the Church confidently proclaims that God 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. Christ “achieved his task of redeeming humanity and giving perfect glory to God, principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and glorious ascension” (SC 5)

The proclamation of Jesus Christ “who was put to death for our sins and raised to life to justify us” (Romans 4:25) is at the center of the Church’s life. The mystery of the Lord’s death and resurrection gives power to all of the Church’s activity. “For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the sublime sacrament of the whole Church.” The Church’s liturgical and sacramental life and proclamation of the Gospel make this mystery present in the life of the faithful. Through the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist, men and women are initiated into this mystery. “You have been taught that when we were baptized in Christ Jesus we were baptized into his death; in other words when we were baptized we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father’s glory, we too might live a new life. If in union with Christ we have imitated his death, we shall also imitate him in his resurrection” (Romans 6:3-5).

In the Eucharistic sacrifice, the Church’s celebration of Christ’s Passover from death to life, the faith of the baptized in the paschal mystery (suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus) is renewed and nourished. Their union with Christ and with each other is strengthened: “Because there is one bread, we who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17).

At the death of a Christian, whose life of faith was begun in the waters of baptism and strengthened at the Eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of its confident belief that death is not the end and does not break the bonds of love and friendship forged in life. The Church also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting Word of God and the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of life, which has now been returned to Him, the author of life, and the hope of the just.

The Mass, the memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral.

The Church through its funeral rites commends the dead to God's merciful love and pleads for the forgiveness of their sins. At the funeral rites, especially at the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice, the Christian community affirms and expresses the union of the Church on earth with the Church in heaven in the one great communion of saints. Though separated from the living, the dead are still at one with the community of believers on earth and benefit from their prayers and intercession. At the rite of final commendation and farewell, the community acknowledges the reality of separation and commends the deceased to God. In this way it recognizes the spiritual bond that still exists between the living and the dead and proclaims its belief that all the faithful will be raised up and reunited in the new heavens and a new earth, where death will be no more.

The celebration of the Christian funeral brings hope and consolation to the living. While proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and witnessing to Christian hope in the resurrection, the funeral rites also recall to all who take part in them God's mercy and judgment and meet the human need to turn always to God in times of crisis.

When a Loved One is Dying

The parish office should be contacted when a loved one is sick so that the Sacrament of Anointing may be celebrated on a regular basis. It is likewise appropriate to call a priest as death draws near so that the Sacraments of Penance and Anointing may be celebrated along with Viaticum (Holy Communion administered for the journey through death to eternal life).

When a Loved One Dies

The parish office should be contacted as soon as possible when someone dies. The Church responds in compassion to those who mourn and journeys with them during their time of grief. During this time parish representatives will meet with the family to offer condolences and hope and to assist in planning the funeral liturgy.

The Vigil (or Wake Service)

The community gathers on the evening before the Funeral Mass to pray and to keep watch with the family. The Word of God is proclaimed as a source of hope in the face of darkness and death. All pray for the deceased, in anticipation of the funeral Mass to be celebrated the next day. Prayers are also offered for the comfort and consolation of the bereaved. This prayer service may take place at the funeral home or in the chapel of our parish church. It is a vigil and therefore, it is to be celebrated in the evening. As the vigil is the proper time to share stories about the deceased, it is also the appropriate time to offer a eulogy or eulogies. The vigil is likewise the proper place for families to display pictures or those things that symbolize the life of the deceased.

The Funeral Mass

The funeral for a Catholic Christian is ordinarily celebrated with a Mass. In the Eucharist the community gathers with the family and friends of the deceased to give praise and thanks to God for Christ's victory over sin and death, to commend the deceased to God's tender mercy and compassion, and to seek strength in the proclamation of the paschal mystery. For some valid reasons the family may choose a funeral liturgy without a Mass. This decision should be made in consultation with one of the priests on staff at Holy Family.

The family and friends of the deceased are encouraged to participate in the funeral liturgy. Our parish representatives will discuss the various ways in which family members can assist at the funeral liturgy (placing the pall, proclaiming the readings, presenting the gifts, etc...).

A eulogy is a speech in praise of a person who has died. At a funeral liturgy we gather to thank God and to petition God on behalf of the deceased. We also gather to celebrate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus who is the "first of many brothers and sisters to rise from the dead." We hope that our loved one will join Him. A eulogy's context is the past. A Christian funeral looks to the future in hope. As such, the Funeral Mass is not the appropriate time for a eulogy. It is far more appropriate for a eulogy to be offered at the Vigil Service or perhaps at the reception that follows the funeral.

If the family insists – following the entrance procession and greeting, one family member or friend may deliver a short remembrance and express their thanks for the community's support. Please remember that in choosing to offer words of remembrance at this time, great reverence and respect for the Church and our Catholic Faith must be observed. Inappropriate sentiments and language are to be strictly avoided. It is never permitted to have more than one person offer words of remembrance.

The Burial or Entombment

Since Jesus' own body was laid in a tomb after his death, it is the traditional practice of the Church to bury or entomb the bodies of our beloved deceased with full faith that our bodies will be glorified in the final resurrection of the dead.

It is most appropriate for Catholics to be buried or entombed in a consecrated Catholic cemetery or mausoleum. The Diocese of Camden maintains a number of cemeteries and mausoleums in all areas of South Jersey. Your funeral director or the priests of the parish can assist you in making the necessary arrangements at one of the diocesan cemeteries. Non-Catholic family members may be buried in a Catholic cemetery. For valid reasons permission can be given for a burial to take place in a sacred place other than a Catholic cemetery.

The Importance of the Body

The body is the primary symbol of a person and the instrument through which we communicate during our lifetime. The care taken to prepare the body of the deceased for burial reflects our Christian belief in eternal life and the resurrection of the body. The prayers and gestures of the funeral rites also affirm the Church's reverence for the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit. The Church encourages the long-standing practice of burying the body in a grave or tomb in memory of Jesus' own three days in the tomb.

Cremation

The Church accepts the practice of cremation as long as the reasons for choosing cremation are not contrary to the Christian way of life. In most cases the cremation should take place following the funeral liturgies. These celebrations should take place with the body present. In this way the community can honor the body, and the bereaved are allowed the proper time to mourn. Death is the last passage of life and should not be hidden or negated by cremation prior to the funeral celebration.

In particular circumstances, it may be necessary for cremation to take place prior to the funeral. In these cases the Church permits the funeral to be celebrated in the presence of the ashes.

Ashes are the body of the deceased in a changed form. We honor them as we honor the body. They must be reverently buried or entombed in a place reserved for the burial of the dead.

immediately following the cremation. It is not acceptable to put off this burial and the Church does not permit the ashes of a Catholic Christian to be scattered or enshrined in the home.

Likewise it is not acceptable to retain any portion of the ashes for these purposes. A funeral Mass cannot be scheduled at Holy Family Parish without specification that the arrangements for a proper Christian burial have been made.

A Memorial Mass

If for some reason the body or the ashes of a loved one have been buried before the funeral, a memorial Mass or service may be celebrated. Please contact the parish offices to make these arrangements.

Non-Catholic Family Members

A non-Catholic member of your immediate family residing in our parish boundaries is at the same time a member of our parish family. As such, a parishioner may request that the funeral of a non-Catholic family member take place here at Holy Family or may ask one of the priests to participate in a service conducted at the funeral home. We would be happy to assist you in any way possible.

Annual Parish Memorial Mass

It is the tradition of the Church to remember those who have gone before us in faith and in death during the month of November. Holy Family Parish celebrates a Mass each year for those who were buried from our parish during the previous year. This Mass is usually celebrated on the evening of November 2, the Feast of All Souls. All are welcome to participate in this Mass.

It is also important to develop traditions in your home that allow you to remember your loved ones. Praying together, enshrining a picture or visiting the cemetery can help families to mourn and to find hope in the life and love that they continue to share.

Scheduling a Funeral

The funeral home will arrange for the date and time of a funeral. Holy Family Parish attempts to schedule funerals at the convenience of the family. The Church however prohibits funerals and funeral Masses on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation as well as some other days. In some circumstances a priest may not be available at a time preferred by the family due to other commitments or scheduled events. In addition, cemetery schedules may affect the choice of a date and time, especially on or near federal holidays.

Funerals are generally celebrated at 10:00 AM here at Holy Family.

Preparing the Funeral Liturgy

Representatives from the parish bereavement ministry will contact the family to assist them in planning the funeral Mass.

Musical selections are to be made with the assistance of the Bereavement Committee. Secular songs are not permitted in Church celebrations and should be reserved to the reception that follows the funeral. If you have any questions in this regard, please contact the parish office.

Stipends and Donations

On the occasion of a funeral, a stipend is generally offered to the parish for the ongoing ministry of the Church.

People are encouraged to remember Holy Family Parish in their wills and in their choice of charities at the death of a loved one. All donations received are promptly acknowledged to the family. Donations to the Sancta Familia Guild specifically help with the ongoing liturgical ministry of the parish. The morning Mass on every first Friday is offered those enrolled in the Sancta Familia Liturgical Guild. For more information contact the parish office.

Preparing Your Funeral in Advance

The Church encourages us to think about our own funerals. With respect for the Church's teaching outlined here, and in dialogue with your family, you may want to leave directions as to how you wish your funeral to be celebrated. You are welcome to consult with any of the priests in making these preparations.

A Final Thought

All too often people say, "Funerals are for the living, not the dead." For faithful Catholics such a statement is not complete, because the Catholic funeral rites offer us the opportunity to praise and thank God for the love and mercy he has shown the deceased person. It is also a time where the community of believers prays for the repose of the soul of the deceased and offers consolation to the surviving family and friends.

