

Catholic Funeral Traditions

Christians believe that God is the giver of all life. People of the Catholic faith view death as the end of life on earth and the beginning of eternal life with God. So the rules they follow at the time of death help a loved one's spirit, or soul return to God. They offer worship, praise and thanks for the gift of life. They pray together that God will welcome the soul into heaven forever.

When death is near, a Catholic priest is called to give what is called the Sacrament of the Living, which is the final ceremony while an individual is alive. This ceremony has three parts: Anointing of the Sick, Reconciliation – also known as final confession – and Holy Communion. Together, these three parts cleanse the soul and get it ready for reunion with God.

Watching Over the Dead

Once death has happened, family and close friends gather together to pray for the soul of the dead person and to care for one another. This period of sadness is referred to as the vigil, or the wake. The word vigil means to watch over or protect. Many years ago, the practice began with family members taking turns watching over the body until burial. Today, Catholics usually arrange for gatherings over two or three days for visitors to say their final good-byes and show their concern for family.

These gatherings usually take place in a funeral home, but someone's home, a church hall or other place may be also used. The body is usually present and the casket is frequently left open for visitors to see the dead person and (sometimes) give a goodbye kiss. For this reason, the vigil is sometimes called the viewing.

A priest often attends the vigil to offer care and support to the family, and to lead them in prayer if they choose.

Common Catholic Symbols

During the vigil and throughout most parts of the ceremony, candles are lit as a sign of eternal light. Many friends will send cards and flowers to show their sadness and love. Flowers like lilies, carnations and mums are used to show remembrance, peace and sadness. Some people may send a Mass card which means they made a donation to a church to have a future church service – a Mass – dedicated to the dead person. Some families suggest donations to charities instead of gifts of flowers because cut flowers live only a short time and a charitable donation benefits others.

When a Catholic dies, there is often a Crucifix – a statue of the body of Jesus on a cross – near the casket or even in the casket. Prayer beads (called a Rosary) that Catholics use to help recite prayers are usually placed in the hands of the deceased. Holy Water that has been blessed by a priest and burning incense may also be used; they are symbols of cleansing and purifying.

The Funeral Ceremony (Mass)

Following the vigil is the funeral mass or ceremony. Before the mass, close family gathers at the place of vigil to begin the ceremony with prayer and closing of the casket. A long funeral car, also called a hearse, is used to take the casket to the church or chapel, often with the family following in a car, or by foot. The priest meets the casket at the door of the church, sprinkles it with Holy Water and prays over it. He or she then walks with the casket toward the front of the church where it remains throughout the ceremony. If the deceased is a priest, the body is positioned with the head facing the altar (the raised stage where the mass is performed). If the dead person is not a priest, the foot of the casket is placed toward the altar.

The funeral ceremony usually follows a strict order of prayer, songs and blessings, and may or may not include the giving of Holy Communion (small pieces of flat bread). During this part of the ceremony, only Catholic guests go to the altar to receive bread (which symbolizes the body of Christ).

The Graveside Ceremony and Burial

After the mass, the casket is taken to the cemetery for burial or the crematory for cremation.

If burial is to take place, mourners follow the funeral car in a procession to the cemetery for a graveside ceremony. Final prayers are offered for the deceased and the priest uses Holy Water to bless the ground or mausoleum in which the casket will be placed.

If cremation is planned, it usually takes place without the family being there. Instead, close family gather at the cemetery a few days or a week after the funeral for placement of the urn and the final blessing from the priest.

At one time, the Catholic Church did not allow cremation out of respect for the sacred connection between the body and the soul. Today, it is permitted as long as it is not chosen for reasons that go against the faith. Cremated remains must be buried or placed in a mausoleum just like a casket. They may not be scattered or placed on display in a home.

While Catholic cemeteries are still a popular choice, there is no church law requiring that a Catholic be buried in a Catholic cemetery.